Still Hands

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Still Hands

by sanguia

Summary

In a rigid matriarchal society, Jonas, a painfully shy and superstitious servant with a stubborn stutter, keeps to the quiet corners of a noble estate, tending to duties that draw little notice. Branwen, the estate's gruff Hunting Marshal, is as blunt as she is skilled, more at home among hounds and horses than with people.

Their paths cross when other servants begin offloading their duties onto Jonas, leading him to do menial tasks in the kennels and stables. What results is an unlikely bond that tests Jonas's quiet solitude and softening Branwen's guarded heart. Together, they navigate a world that expects obedience from him, command from her, and offers little space for tenderness between the two.

Basically my attempt at a low stakes, potentially cozy romance.

Notes

I have not forgotten my other story. I just haven't had motivation for it recently. I just wanted to write something soft, I guess.

Chapter 1

The frost still clings stubbornly to the edges of the lane, coating the grass in a brittle, silver lace that glitters faintly beneath the pale wash of dawn. Jonas's breath comes as soft clouds, fading quickly into the crisp morning air as he walks the long and winding path toward the stables and kennels. He carries a new bed for one of the hounds.

The Lady's estate is spread out around him like a miniature country. Rows of neatly clipped hedgerows border endless rolling fields that dips gently toward the dense, ancient forest that is made of a seemingly impenetrable sea of dark, brooding mass of oaks. Beyond, the hills rise in distant waves, crowned with the faintest touch of morning mist.

A low wind stirs the grass in the meadows, brushing along the dew-drenched stalks and setting them trembling with faint light. Crows shift lazily from branch to branch in the upper woods. Somewhere farther off, a gate creaks, and the sharp clop of hooves echoes faintly across the valley. Some of the stablehands must be beginning their rounds. The scent of damp earth, saddle oil, and woodsmoke drifts faintly on the breeze, meaning Jonas is reaching his destination.

He's not entirely sure it's a destination he wants to arrive at.

Jonas's feet make soft, careful steps on the gravel, each one muffled as part of the estate's unspoken rule: the *Quiet March.* From the moment servants stir and until the nobility are fully roused, no footfall dares break the fragile peace of sleeping chambers. It is a dance learned young and drilled hard. One must walk with light steps, barely-there motions, and eyes always alert to the command of silence. Surely, he needn't be so conscious of his footwork outside, but he feels compelled to remain silent lest he become careless once he returns inside. The last thing he'd want is for the Housekeeper-General,

though she preferred to just be called Maud, to yell at him and rescind a day's worth of payment.

Keeping a quiet pace, Jonas briefly looks back at the main house. The tall windows of the great building catch the palest glimmer of light, still half-sunk in sleep. Ivy clings to its western wing like a second skin and smoke begins to rise from a far chimney. It's the scullery, most likely, where the servants would already be setting the bread to rise. It would be hours yet before The Lady herself stirred.

He *should* be there. But another servant, Merrill, had unceremoniously told— not asked— him to replace one of the hound beds. Jonas knows that anything kennel related is Merrill's duty for the month. He's meant to do it with another servant named Fenn, not that it matters. This would be the fifth time this week he has shirked his chores onto Jonas. He is not the only one to give him extra work, either.

And Jonas, naturally, took the added responsibility without complaint.

He never complained. It is simply easier not to.

Ahead, the stables and kennels come into view. It is a cluster of weathered, connected stone buildings with steep roofs thick with moss and curling chimneys breathing wisps of smoke into the cool air. The scent becomes harder to ignore: hay and damp fur mingling with manure, leather oil, and the sharp, pungent tang of hound musk. A chorus of restless movement murmurs from within. Horses stamping and snorting, their chains jingling as they toss their heads. The dogs are already half-awake, there are low whines, the occasional sharp yap, and nails scratching impatiently against timber gates.

Jonas pauses briefly, heart tightening. He's never interacted with the Hunting Marshal, the woman in charge of the animals of the estate,

but he's seen her from afar occasionally. She is rather brusque, and entirely intimidating. Jonas hopes he can keep any communication at a minimum if not entirely non-existent. He tightens his grip on the dog bed that is slung over his arm, while another hand brushes his wool token affixed to his tunic's breast. It is little more than a rough square of gray cloth, frayed at the edges, stitched hurriedly with The Lady's initials— *M.A.* — in thread darkened by years of wear. The token is a symbol of belonging, quietly worn by all servants as a badge of their place in the household's hierarchy. For Jonas, it is both a shield and a comfort.

His fingers jolt when a sound snaps through the yard. There is a sharp stamp of hooves, a high equine squeal, and a voice follows, brisk and unimpressed.

"No. Not like that. Again."

Someone else, a stablehand presumably, stammers something. It's too low for Jonas to catch, but it's followed immediately by a sharp response. The Hunting Marshal doesn't speak with the rounded vowels of the highborn; her accent is provincial, maybe Western Coastal or Lower Timberline. A strange thing, to hear it here on an Eastern estate.

"You're pulling too fast. You'll make her skittish before the straps are even tight. This mare's not green. *You* are. If you can't see the twitch in her off-leg, you're not fit to touch her bridle."

Before Jonas can round the corner, a woman barely older than himself, freckled and flushed, rushes past him. Her face is drawn tight with embarrassment. She bites her lip, and retreats toward the far end of the courtyard with stiff and hasty steps. Jonas hesitantly edges closer, and when he sees the stable doors he only sees a glimpse of the mare's rear as it is led back inside.

A few of the dogs begin barking at once, one of them howling, only for the cacophony to be pierced by a low whistle. It isn't angry. It's worse than angry. It's confident. Commanding. A second follows, lower-pitched, almost like a word folded into the sound. And just like that, the barking stops.

Jonas shouldn't be here long. He just needs to replace the ruined bedding in the corner stall, mind his step, and don't speak unless spoken to. In and out before the Hunting Marshal so much as glances his way. *Simple.*

Jonas swallows.

He's heard whispers of her, of course. The Hunting Marshal. She's not noble, but she holds rank above nearly all the house staff, and more than one servant's been reassigned for getting in her way. Apparently, she doesn't answer to any of the stewards and she once broke up a dog fight with nothing but her forearm. Someone said she was from the low provinces, somewhere past the stone passes, and that she's only here because The Lady owes her some ancient debt. Or The Lady hired her when she once broke a man's nose for ignoring a lameness in a horse. Others say she's here because no one else can handle the hounds in the winter season.

A hoof stamps in the stable. Somewhere nearby, a dog sneezes and gives a soft *whuff*. Jonas edges forward.

He reminds himself not to flinch, not to speak. Not unless spoken to.

His feet stop just short of the entrance. The sky was lightening but not yet full day— *twilight still clung to the corners* , that thin, in-between hour when the world was neither night nor morning, and things better left unseen might still stir.

The doorway yawns dark and wide before him, the old iron latch hanging slightly ajar. The building's thick stone walls streaked with lichen and the wooden beams above weathered to a smoky grey. A pair of hounds stir by some shift in the air or the scent of a stranger. Being noticed makes Jonas's skin prickle.

He glances up at the dim, cracked lintel, where the shadows pooled thickest. He *knows* it is perhaps silly, childish even, every rational part of him whispers as much, but the old fear grips him anyway. His grandparents used to say the fair folk wander at this hour, thin as smoke and just as hard to see, slipping through doorways like spilled water. If they caught your shadow as you crossed a threshold, they'd follow you, curl up in your bedclothes, muddle your speech, make the butter spoil, and call your name from dark corners.

Shadow Crossing , they'd called it. *"Never walk under a shadowed beam before the sun's full,"* she'd warned, thumb pressed to the centre of his forehead, *"Else something might notice you."*

Jonas rubs his wool token lightly between two fingers, thinking of an old rhyme he has since stopped vocalizing over the years. It's easier to use the voice in his head.

Salt to heel, smoke to brow, let no unseen follow now.

Avoiding any shadows, he steps inside.

The air is immediately warmer. It is thick with the heat of bodies and the oily tang of houndskin. He keeps his head down and his steps even, following the smooth-worn stones that lead along the kennel wall. The hounds are caged in iron-barred pens that face the centre path, and though he doesn't look directly, he *feels* them watching.

Their heavy shoulders shift. Their nails scrape against wood. One lets out a low chuff and presses its broad nose to the bars as he passes.

He does not make eye contact. He wonders if this is what the forest animals they hunt feel like just before their impending doom.

The hounds' shapes flicker at the edges of his vision. Lean, long-legged creatures bred for the highlands, muscle and bone wrapped in dark fur. None bark, though. That whistle still seems to linger in the air like a command unfinished.

From the arched stonework that links the kennels and stables, a voice carries.

"Green as spring barley," It comes out as an annoyed grunt. There's a pause, then there's a sound of hooves shifting against packed straw, "Can't even spot a stiff gait unless the leg's hanging clean off. They watch my face instead of the horse's."

She's only just on the other side of the wall. She's barely a corridor away. If she steps through that gate, she'll see him.

Jonas moves just a little faster.

The Hunting Marshal must be working with the horse with the bad leg, the one she scolded the stablehand about. The mare shifts again, giving a breathy, disgruntled *huff* . There's a soft murmur from the Hunting Marshall and a soft thump, knuckles tapping some part of the horse if he had to guess. It's followed by the sound of something being adjusted, and the horse settles. Her tone, when she speaks again, is dry.

“Can’t hold a lead, can’t read a tail. Might as well tie bells to their boots and call it a warning.”

He doesn’t intend to cross her path today. One wrong sound, one awkward glance, and she might think he’s eavesdropping… Or worse, *loitering.*

She mutters again, softer this time.

“Tell me which of them clipped you, girl. I’ll have her on oats for a week.”

Jonas quickly finds the corner stall, a place with tools he can’t fathom the use of. The hound pens behind him remain unnervingly quiet. He takes the new bedding out of its clean cloth wrapping, and takes hold of the old one, his fingers brushing the coarse straw stuffing. The Hunting Marshal had wanted to place the bed in the appropriate pen on her own time, which Jonas is quite keen on. *On her own time…* Which means it’s his cue to leave.

He backs away from the stall, careful not to let his boots scuff the stone, and does not look back towards the stables. As he walks, he pulls his tunic. His hands tremble, despite not being cold. Rather, he feels the jitters due to the memory of eyes watching him, waiting for mistakes he dares not make.

He stops at the doorway, one foot resting just before the line. The light is better now, just barely, but his brief pause at the shadows is enough. That’s when she steps out.

Jonas hears the soft sound of the stall gate unlatching. The quiet, unhurried rhythm of boots on stone. The Hunting Marshal emerges from the stables proper with the fluid weight of someone who’s used

to heavy labour and doesn't see the need to move fast unless there's a fire or a foaling.

Jonas stiffens, spine tight as wire. He shouldn't look. He knows he shouldn't. His training has taught him as much, etiquette demands he keep his head down. But *something…* Some old whisper of dread and the fair folk from childhood stories, or maybe just plain nerves, makes him glance over his shoulder.

She looks… *formidable.*

Her coat is thick wool, belted tight at the waist, sleeves rolled to the elbow. Her forearms are dusted with flecks of straw and sweat, corded with muscle earned from years of lifting and hauling. A long braid is twisted up off her neck, pinned with the kind of quick, imprecise efficiency that says she's not here to be looked at. No servant's cap. No ribbons. Not even a wool token. Just work.

There's a welt on one knuckle and a smudge of saddle grease on her collar. Her boots are scuffed and braced like she's still half-rooted in the stall behind her. Her expression is, *thankfully,* unbothered. She's not in the least bit surprised to find someone else in the corridor. Of course she isn't. She's likely seen a hundred servants come through the kennels and stables, most of them carrying things or cleaning something, and none of them important.

Jonas's heart gives a single, traitorous thud.

He drops his gaze immediately. As he should have done from the start.

Head bowed, shoulders slightly dipped in deference, he steps cleanly over the iron *Shadow Crossing* and out into the pale morning.

It can't even be called a proper interaction. Barely an acknowledgement of either one's existence.

And yet, as he continues back to the house, Jonas feels the tension in his jaw and in his lungs.

He hadn't even *spoken* to her.

And still— *still* — he feels as though he's just walked away from something with teeth.

He thinks about his rhyme for good measure.

Let not shadow walk with me.

The sun is high by the time Branwen finishes with the tack inspections and walks the rise to the southern pasture.

Mild sunlight presses at her back through the thick wool of her coat, but she doesn't shrug it off. It may still be frosty in the mornings, but spring is on the horizon and it's getting warmer, slowly. Not that it ever gets *too* warm here to begin with. The wind is stronger up here too, sweet with trampled clover and dust. Beyond the fence, the mares shift lazily in the sunlight, tails swishing, and ears flicking at flies. A foal kicks out near the thistle edge, gangly and over-bold. One of the stablehands clicks her tongue and jogs to catch it before it noses too close to the broken wall.

Branwen watches and whistles to herself.

She leans against the fence rail, arms folded. Her sleeves are down now, hiding the welted knuckle, but her hands still ache faintly from the morning's labour. She shifts her weight, her eyes narrowing slightly. She doesn't speak, but she doesn't need to. The girls down there know the Hunting Marshal is watching. They tend to stand straighter when she's in the field.

Their form is decent, she'll give them that. Buckles are fastened, leads are slack, and nobody's dragging a bridle or tripping over a looped rein today. They're *trying*. It's better than most days.

Still… Too much noise. Too much handling for handling's sake. That one at the end, Esther, she thinks, keeps giving commands before the filly has time to think. The horse doesn't need more noise. She needs space to puzzle it out.

Branwen grunts quietly. No point shouting now. She'll speak to Esther after supper.

Someone passes at the far edge of the pen, a servant in a dark tunic and an apron, their slim frame hunched slightly beneath the weight of a feed sack. Not one of hers. One of those kitchen runners, maybe. But the shape sticks in her mind a second longer than usual.

Right. That's the one from this morning.

Chestnut brown hair, cropped to the temple and curled where it dried uneven. Boyish face with wide-eyes, noticeable even from a distance. He *could* be a bit pretty, just not noble-pretty. He's… unweathered and

tended. But thin as a sapling. Scrawny, even. Like he doesn't sleep much. Or eat enough to keep the wind out of his sleeves.

She briefly remembers when he'd paused in the doorway, and something in the angle of him had struck her as strange, like he'd been listening for something in the shadows before stepping out into the light.

Regardless, he's not one of hers, though usually it's a stablehand carrying feed sacks around.

She doesn't spare him much more thought. The Lady's house is full of little people doing little errands with narrow shoulders and downturned eyes. She sees a hundred pass by each week and forgets most by nightfall.

Still though… The dogs hadn't barked. Her whistle doesn't shut them up for that long, and certainly not when someone new trudges in. And she didn't even notice the lad until he was leaving. He had left a new dog bed in the corner stall, meaning he ventured a decent distance within the kennels and was very quiet about it. If Branwen were to think about it for more than five seconds she might be impressed, since most of the servants sent to do errands in her space tend to be noisier than a sow in heat. The *Quiet March* apparently does not apply to where the animals are housed.

Branwen exhales through her nose, eyes drifting back to the pasture.

The sun is bright, the horses calm. Rilke, her own personal mare, is down there too, half-limping through the grass with her usual stubborn dignity. She'll need warm compresses tonight and a steady hand to wrap her again before the cold settles.

Branwen might have to do it herself. None of the girls can tie a bandage worth a damn.

The feed sack had nearly split his shoulder.

Jonas walks with the empty bindings still looped over his fingers, his breath shallow and the ache in his arms blooming dull and warm beneath the linen of his sleeves. It wasn't far from the grain store to the pasture edge, but the sack had been packed heavy, much too heavy for someone his size, and he hadn't dared ask for help. Not when he knew what *that* would look like.

The linen digs into the crook of his fingers. He doesn't let go. There's a strange comfort in the discomfort, it's something to hold on to. At least, that's what he tells himself. If he overthinks it, maybe it'll dull the ache a little more.

He's halfway back through the garden court when a voice cuts across the path.

"Jonas."

He stops. He recognizes that voice, and he mentally steels himself for what's about to come. Jonas thought he might have been finished with this sort of thing for today, but apparently he was wrong.

Merrill strides toward him, hands in his pockets and his posture easy. He's taller, older by a year or two, with the effortless confidence of someone used to being listened to. His dark hair is uncombed and his livery's undone at the collar, apron draped over one shoulder like a

sash. He smells faintly of hearth ash and oranges, probably from The Lady's salon despite the fact he's probably not meant to be there today. He's not following any etiquette expected of servants. If Maud sees him now, her scolding would shake the very foundations of the estate.

"You finished with the feed, yeah?"

Jonas nods, once. No more than that.

"Good," Merrill claps a hand against the wall beside him and jerks his chin toward the far wing of the house, "Need you to wipe down the parlour stairwell. Mud tracks again. Should've been done yesterday but no one noticed, so..."

He trails off and doesn't bother to explain further.

Jonas doesn't move. The linen shifts in his hand. He knows— *knows* — that's not his task. The parlour stairwell is Merrill's responsibility this week. Everyone knows the rotation. But Jonas hesitates.

His mouth opens slightly. A breath. Then—

He nods.

Not a word. Just a small tilt of the chin.

Merrill grins, already walking away, "You're a good one, Jonas," He's probably off to nap somewhere Maud won't see him.

Jonas watches him go, stomach tight with something that isn't quite anger, but close. The kind of feeling that curls in on itself. He doesn't say anything. He never does. Requests are easier to swallow than refusals.

He turns and starts toward the parlour wing, fingers loosening their grip on the feed ties. His arms still throb from the weight, but he'll fetch a bucket and a cloth and kneel by the stairs like he's meant to be there.

Because that's what's expected of someone like him.

The parlour stairwell is already warm when he enters it, the windows slanting golden light across the polished floors like a spotlight meant for someone else. Jonas keeps to the edge of the light, eyes low. The bucket sloshes against his shin.

He kneels at the bottom of the stairs.

The floor tiles here are deep blue and foxglove grey, laid in curling spirals. The bannister curves high and severe. It's lacquered ebony, making it so dark it reflects nothing but shapes. Above, the steps climb past tall windows, beneath which stand The Lady's chosen ornaments. Not seasonal garlands or copper vases like the servants' wing, but things collected. " *Imported* ," Merrill once said, sounding the word out slow like it tasted foreign in his mouth.

There's a tall bronze bust shaped like a crowned woman with six eyes. A narrow table carved with birds he's never seen in real life. A woven screen folded like a fan, embroidered with trees that bend the wrong way.

Jonas doesn't look too closely. The parlour's full of things that feel *watched* , even when no one's there.

He begins scrubbing at the third step. Someone had tracked in mud, probably one of the visiting riders, too proud to remove her boots. The stain's stubborn and smeared deep into the grout. He dips the rag again, scrapes at it harder. Everything always needs to be spotless, but it *especially* needs to look nice now that spring's coming into full bloom. That means parties and gatherings, and The Lady's estate holds a lot of space for a lot of people.

Above him, the wall is hung with a large painting, one he's never dared ask about. It always unsettled him. A hunting scene, though the beasts are too long in the jaw, and the dogs have too many legs. The sky is thick with ash-coloured wings, but no birds.

Jonas tries not to look at it as he works. He was used to the rules of other people's spaces. You don't speak unless asked. You don't linger where you're not meant to be. You don't look directly at the things that make your neck prickle.

He shifts to the next step. His knees hurt. His arms still ache from the feed sack earlier. He thinks of the chore chart in the servant's kitchen, his *real* duties, still unchecked. Linens to fetch, lamp oil to replenish, two rooms to sweep. Merrill's task has cost him half the afternoon.

He should have said no. He *meant* to say no. But the word had jammed like a stone in his throat, the way it always did.

His hand slows on the rag.

The painting above him creaks faintly in its frame.

Jonas freezes.

A draft, probably. No, it is almost *certainly* a draft. The windows are tall and rattling this time of year. Still, his heart gives a startled thump. He glances behind him, though he knows better. His grandparents told him once that old places remember. That highborn houses, especially ones near crossings, sometimes kept things *in* them. Courting pieces from the old courts. Gifts gone sour. Little creatures who didn't like to be seen too clearly.

Don't look too long. Don't hum while sweeping. Don't turn around if you hear your name and no one is there.

He wipes the next step a little faster.

The hallway outside is still empty. There's no one to tell him to move faster, and yet he does. Some part of him, long-trained and bone-deep, says he's overstayed already. Jonas wrings the cloth one last time, rising stiffly. The steps are still damp, but clean. Good enough. He takes the bucket and hurries back the way he came, avoiding the bronze statue's six-eyed stare.

He's halfway down the north corridor, bucket swinging gently at his side, when someone calls his name. It's not loud, nor is it urgent, but it's said in that same casual expectation that always finds him.

"Jonas."

He stops. Again.

Another servant, this one named Fenn. He rounds the corner, sauntering in that half-lazy way of his, shirt half-buttoned beneath his vest, a lemon rind between his teeth. He plucks it free as he walks and tosses it into a wall sconce with a soft *ping* .

“Need you to take the Monday kennel shift for me next week,” Fenn says, “I’ve got laundry duty and I’m not scrubbing hound shite on top of silks, thanks.”

It’s not a question. It never is.

Jonas opens his mouth— then closes it. The same routine again.

A breath gathers, brittle in his chest. He’s not even sure where his own Monday shift is meant to be. Somewhere dull and dusty, no doubt. Fenn's already started to walk away, one hand raising in a backward wave, “Ta. You’re a real soft thing, Jonas.”

Jonas stands still for a moment longer. The corridor is quiet again.

He nods to no one. Just once.

Then he keeps walking, head down, the bucket dripping against his leg with every step.

The soap stings the cut across her knuckle. She ignores it.

Elbow-deep in cold water, Branwen scrubs out a rust-ringed feeding pan, the scum biting back under her fingernails. The old lye soap has gone soft from too much steam and too little care, but she works it hard into the pan's bottom, her brow knit tight. Her sleeves are rolled to the elbow, and her arms are freckled with dried hay-dust and sweat. A smear of something from the mare's flank streaks one wrist, half-scrubbed and forgotten.

Branwen doesn't look up when the gate creaks open.

But she hears it, something slow and uncertain. A single bootstep, then hesitation. No greeting. No clatter. Just quiet, shuffling stillness at the entrance. Branwen angles her head slightly.

She sees the same one from before. He pauses, like he expects something to reach out and slap him for arriving.

She flicks her eyes toward the doorway without lifting her chin. What was his name? Not that it matters much. But seeing him a bit closer now, he sees he's soft around the mouth but all edges in the shoulders, like he hasn't quite figured out how to wear himself. Pale too, and with that stillness like a fawn in tall grass.

He stands just outside the threshold, eyes lowered. He's not frozen, but rather he's waiting for something. Almost like he's afraid to walk through. At first, she thinks he's stalling. Then she notices his mouth, the shape of it— he's not saying anything, but his lips still move. His hand hovers near the wooden post, thumb brushing the carved notch at the hinge and he steps in while avoiding any shadows. *The Shadow Crossing.*

Branwen narrows her eyes faintly, amused despite herself. So he's one of *those.*

She nods once, an acknowledgment and not a greeting, and turns back to the basin. No need to interrupt whatever little warding he's doing. She's heard the superstitions before. Old blood tales and folk in the shadows. Ridiculous, but harmless, as long as it doesn't get in the way of work.

A moment later, she hears him move again. The soft scrape of boots on straw and bristles rasping on stone, and frankly, if the door wasn't the noisy type she probably wouldn't have realized he's even here. She's only hearing all the noises because she's aware of his presence. Soon enough, there's some sloshing of water being placed down slowly.

He's in the stall across from her, kneeling low, carefully scrubbing the moss-dark base of the outer kennel wall. She doesn't bother to give instructions. That part always needs scrubbing. She's done it herself a dozen times when no one else would. It reeks of old piss and dog-sick and wet straw— but he doesn't flinch.

He doesn't speak. She half expects a fumble for niceties like most of the servant boys do around her, especially since they've both acknowledged each other's existence. But he doesn't ask what she's doing and he doesn't try to start a chat about the hounds or the weather. She always hated small talk.

He just works.

Branwen rinses her hands and leans back on her heels. Her boots creak slightly on the damp flagstone. She lifts the next basin and spares him a longer glance this time.

He's not fast, but he's deliberate. Each motion is tidy, even if he's

worn thin. Hands moving in slow circles, steady as breath. No scrubbing for show, no half-hearted dabbing. He's quiet and constant.

Perhaps sensing her watching, he glances up and meets her eyes. It only lasts for a heartbeat.

He startles like he's been struck. Drops his gaze to the floor so fast it's almost painful to see. She doesn't smile. Just exhales through her nose and goes back to stacking the pans.

Quiet boy, she thinks, *Thank the gods.*

She prefers quiet. The other stablehands, and especially the domestic staff, never know when to shut up. Always asking things, always angling for some easier job or chance to prove they were different, like they were better or more than they were. They knew when to shut up with the prissy nobles, at least.

But this one? He moves like someone used to not being noticed.

She hoists the last feed bag up onto her shoulder. Heavy, but manageable. Her boots thud softly past him. He doesn't need telling, he just shrinks slightly to the side like a shadow curling away from fire. He doesn't look up nor does he try to speak.

When she leaves the kennels, she doesn't look back.

Later, after the noon meal, Branwen stands by the pasture fence with one foot balanced on the bottom rail. The horses graze lazily in the distance, tails twitching at flies. She tears a strip of dried meat with her teeth and chews without much care. Her gaze skims the far end of

the paddock where the younger stablehands are trying to lift a harness off the wrong mare. They're not all incompetent, however, as at least one of them corrects the other and does it properly. Regardless, too many mistakes from the group as a whole.

She mutters something sharp under her breath. Branwen then catches movement near the outer stable door, just a flicker, and her thoughts drift back to the boy from this morning.

Scrawny. Soft-faced. Hard to place by age. Maybe seventeen? Eighteen? Young enough that his shoulders haven't settled, old enough to know better. His hair is a little too fine to lie flat. And he stares at the ground like it might bite him.

She hadn't spared him much thought before. Still doesn't, really. But—

He's quiet and careful. *Obedient.*

Not useless, that one. Knows how to get a job done.

Still. Poor lad, stuck with the inside lot.

She wouldn't trade places if they begged her.

The hound's new collar gleams in the morning light. It's stamped leather, dyed a deep oxblood, and fitted with a clasp that's likely silver, though Branwen hasn't tested it. No point. It's not meant for rough wear.

The dog, who's probably going to be given some ridiculous name by her new owner, moves alert at her heel and twitches every time a scent breaks across the gravel. Branwen keeps the leash short, her grip firm. Every time the hound starts to veer toward the underbrush, toward the river birds or the squirrel skitterings in the thickets, she gives a sharp whistle through her teeth and a subtle flick of her wrist. No fuss, just stern correction that's always respected.

The collar wasn't her choice. The buyer insisted. The sort who wore riding gloves and ivory-handled crops but couldn't mount a pony without help from a footwoman and half the stable staff. A collector of things that moved and breathed but weren't allowed to bite. The worst kind. She almost pities the hound and its eventual new owner. It's going to be a disastrous matchup, no doubt, but one day the noble cooed at the dogs and The Lady nonchalantly said they could buy one.

Branwen walks the hound down the gravel path toward the riverbank, boots crunching over the last of the frost-silvered stones. Above, early bird chatter crackles through the canopy. The branches are starting to blush green at the tips, just barely. The thaw comes quicker each morning. Soon the path will be all mud and puddles, the wind off the river smelling of moss instead of ice. She tucks her chin further into her coat anyway, more out of habit than need.

At the water's edge, three of the noble girls, young daughters of some of The Lady's frequent visitors, are perched on low folding stools, painting in the weak light. They have draped imported silk shawls over their arms in decorative folds that will do nothing against the cold. But it still probably cost more than Branwen's whole kit. Their palettes rest on lacquered boxes. The smell of lavender oil and citrus resin reaches even this far.

The dog pulls slightly, ears twitching toward the rustle of silk. Branwen clicks her tongue once. The hound slows.

One of the girls— blonde, powdered, and already bored with her canvas— laughs at something another says, then waves a brush in the air like a wand, “It’s the sea air, I swear. In Port Malith, it turns your hair silver. The salt gets into everything. The linens at the inn were crusted with it, like snow.”

Branwen glances toward them, just once. *Port Malith.* She’s heard the name in passing, somewhere on the coast, she thinks, farther than she’s ever gone. Something with trade ships and storm squalls. Eels the length of a grown man’s leg, if the rumours are true.

She touches her braid briefly, adjusting the twist behind her ear. It’s still damp from the morning wash, coarse and plain. Not silver. Not anything worth remarking on.

She says nothing.

The dog whines low in its throat. Branwen brings it to a halt with a firm step and a snap of the leash.

“Sit.”

The hound obeys after a breath’s pause, tongue flicking once at the scent of pondweed and smoke. Branwen watches the water ripple, the paintbrushes waggle, the girls with their stories and silk hems trailing in the dead leaves. She stands at the edge of it all like a fence post— battered, weather-proof and not even worth noticing. She prefers it that way.

She continues walking the hound, then there’s a hushed whisper, teasing and airy. It doesn’t come from the noble girls.

Off to the side, a cluster of housemaids wait like shade-bound statuary, their voices low, cups of tea steaming in their hands. They're ready to serve the nobles at a moment's notice, but whisper quietly enough so that said nobles don't hear them because that would be improper or some other bullshite. Wouldn't want the help to make a sound that could distract some amateur painter from their art. They're not even that good at painting. *Psh.*

"—swear he'd scrub the chimneys if you asked, poor thing."

"Oh, Jonas is such a blessing. I haven't washed linens in weeks. Just say I've a headache, and he does it without blinking."

"One time, I left the ash bin by the cellar stairs, and guess who took it down for me?"

"Didn't even ask why it was there, I'll bet."

"He never does. Just looks at you all wide-eyed, like a deer."

Branwen's step falters, just for a beat. She glances sidelong. Not at the girls, they wouldn't notice her looking anyway, but toward the gravel beyond the river, toward the faint memory of the boy she's seen about three times now. Skittish. Mute as a post the whole time he scrubbed moss from the kennel walls. *Wide-eyed, like a deer.*

So his name is Jonas, then.

Well, they might not be speaking of the same person she's thinking of, but something tells Branwen that her assumption is correct. He seems

like the type to be a doormat.

Branwen clicks her tongue and whistles, and the hound drops obediently to another sit at her heel. She turns her face forward again, eyes narrowing just slightly.

Not sweetness. He's not doing all that to be nice, she thinks, recalling the way the boy shrunk away as she passed, *That's not kindness. That's survival.*

She doesn't feel sorry for him. That's not her way. But she understands the shape of people who'd rather disappear than speak up. People who've been taught that being useful is the safest thing you can be.

"Pathetic," one of the maids snickers.

Branwen rolls her jaw and walks on and doesn't say a word. But she feels the weight of something shifting. Not much, just a pinch of recognition. Enough to remember him next time.

The trick to carrying four chamber pots without spilling is not to *balance* them, but to *surrender* to their weight. Let the slosh and stagger pass through the hips, keep your hands firm, your steps soft. Jonas had learned that his second week in the house, when the older maids laughed at him for soaking his shoes.

The chamber pots weren't his ward for this week. But Lady Dory's scullery girl had a limp from yesterday, and someone needed to see to it.

“Be a dear and take those, won’t you?” She’d said, already turning her back. She did not limp.

He’d nodded.

The day passed in such pieces— scrubbing stair crevices with vinegar and rag, emptying ashes from rooms he’d never stepped foot in before, polishing The Lady’s carriage lanterns after they were spotted speckled. That task belonged to Timothy, technically. But Timothy had ducked out just after noon, saying something vague about a saddle fitting.

“Could you, Jonas?”

“She’ll never notice the smudge if you just—”

“He said he’d do it last week, but would you be a love and take it instead?”

At some point in the long grey afternoon, he'd been summoned to fold linens for the upper parlour’s evening tea. He retrieved *On the Dignity of Service* from the steward’s sideboard drawer— a slim, printed manual issued to all male domestic staff upon hiring.

It opens with a quote:

In every fold, there is devotion. In every silence, loyalty.

Jonas follows the diagrams— first the swan, then the flowering tulip. Not every boy got to fold for the upper parlour. The Lady preferred tidy symmetry and *no fingerprints.*

Beneath the diagrams were quiet instructions:

Do not meet the lady's gaze unless prompted.
Keep your chin lowered while receiving reprimand.
Let your hands speak for you. Let your work offer all the grace your voice cannot.

He mouthed those lines. Just to practice. His tongue trips even on silence.

By dusk, he had not eaten a full meal. He'd taken two bites of crust from the staff kitchen before being summoned to deliver a tray to the linen mistress. Afterward, he forgot where he left the bread. It was likely tossed.

The estate quiets as night deepens and the noble wing goes silent. Jonas passes through the back corridor barefoot, as was custom. *Quiet March* hours are in effect— no clattering heels or heavy steps after the third bell— those shadowy hours before dawn when servants move like ghosts through the halls, careful not to wake their betters.

Jonas was still folding linen napkins from the garden tea, still blotting wax off polished wood, long after most of the staff had vanished from the halls.

He doesn’t like walking back to the quarters when the lights are out.

The servants' wing is connected to the house by a narrow corridor. The lamp sconces are usually dimmed by then, part tradition, part punishment for anyone who dallied. Jonas doesn’t carry a lamp. His hands are full of scraps of laundry he hadn’t been asked to collect.

He dips two fingers into the small brass bowl mounted by the threshold of the servant's hall. It's an old house ritual, meant to ward off idle thoughts or errant pride gathered during the day.

He crosses the threshold. Everything is quiet.

Jonas’s cot is wedged into a corner, near the hearth that no one bothers lighting in summer. Underneath his pillow is a threadbare bit of red, once part of a garment belonging to his mother. They’d let him keep it, saying it was sentimental. Most boys have something small from home, things like bits of jewelry, a wooden carving, even a curl of hair.

It’s meant to remind them who they served, who’d given them permission to be in this world.

Jonas sits heavily, fingers aching. The air smells of starch and sleep. Only then does he remember the letter. His brother’s handwriting is pressed firm into the envelope, impatient even in ink. Jonas picks it up, but his eyes blur with exhaustion. He sets it down again.

Instead, he presses his forehead against his folded hands for a moment. Not in prayer, just in pause. His knees still ache from scrubbing and his back feels tight as a wire.

Tomorrow, someone will ask him to do more.

And he would nod. Of course he would.

He always did.

But he'd done well. Not perfectly, never perfectly, but well enough.

He was a good boy. He hoped that was enough.

It’s the third time in a week the quiet boy has been sent her way.

Branwen doesn’t ask why. It merely confirmed her suspicions that he is indeed the same lad the housemaids gossiped about. She hauls tack from the hooks and sees him appear at the side entrance, arms full of brushes, buckets, cloths too fine for stable work. She grunts to herself. *Must be someone's idea of a joke. He’s not built for this type of work. I doubt he’s built for half the work in the damn house, too.*

She hefts the bridle onto a peg and bends to gather a stray blanket. The horses are restless today, and she didn’t have the patience to coddle them. One of The Lady’s guest’s husband has been boasting about his *“delicate saddle posture”* and would need a mount prepared by midday. As if that mattered. He’d be whining about blisters before they were halfway to the river.

Branwen moves past the boy, Jonas, surely, near the far end of the kennel where some feed sacks had burst. He’d knelt and is scooping the scattered grain into a pail with a flat hand, quiet as ever.

And then—

Grrrk.

The sound stops her. Subtle. *Embarrassed* , almost. Another low groan happens, unmistakable this time: the sound of an empty stomach.

She turns her head slightly, just enough to glance over.

Jonas's face has gone tight and still, as if he hopes sheer silence might take it back. His cheeks pinked. But more than that, what catches her, what keeps Branwen's gaze lingering, is the slope of his shoulders. The bruised look beneath his eyes. The way his back bends with more weariness than weight.

Exhausted, she realizes, *More than tired. Worn out.* Like a mule on its last turn through the frost.

She doesn't say anything, doesn't stop him either. That isn't her place. If she gives every tired person a break, she'd be short four stablehands by sunrise.

So instead, she turns back to her tools and works in silence.

Eventually, Jonas finishes and leaves. His retreat is quiet, his steps as careful as ever, like he fears even his departure might be a bother. Branwen stays behind to sweep the hay. She finds herself listening to see if he will stop and eat something on his way out. But there is nothing— just the flap of a bird against the high eaves and the

nickering of the horses.

A while later, she goes to the back alcove where she keeps her personal stock of trail food. Mostly dried apples and smoked rabbit.

Her hand hovers over the dried meat.

She doesn't take anything. Not yet.

But she stands there a long while, just looking at it.

The next morning brings in low fog. Branwen arrives at the stables before sunrise, as always. She preferred it that way— before anyone gets in the habit of needing her. She prefers to get to oiling the leather straps and mucking out the water troughs before any visiting nobles think to bring their polished boots and dainty voices near her hounds or horses.

The fog seeps into the beams like a breath held too long, damp and clinging. It beads along the iron hinges and leaves a chill in the straw, softening every hoofbeat and hinge-cry into whispers. Branwen rolls her shoulders beneath her oilskin coat. The cold sticks, no matter how briskly she works.

By the time the boy comes again, Jonas, she reminds herself again, she'd already hauled out the saddle rugs, raked the straw, and swept down the tack wall.

She's starting to recognize his soft and quick steps, and sure enough, he hesitates at the door just long enough to do whatever warding spell he's doing in his head. Branwen glances upwards, seeing him trace his fingers over his wool token and mouthing something. His eyes remain downcast when he meanders inside.

He doesn't greet her, of course. He enters without a word and begins sweeping grain that has spilled beneath the feed crates. Not his job to do, presumably.

He hovers in the periphery of the space like a shadow clinging to the corners. At this point he's done just about every menial task in the kennels and stables: scrubbing someone's boot tray, cleaning the pens when the hounds are out, shoveling out the waste, replacing feed, and a myriad of things that's become routine. Different day, same chores.

But this time, she'd *left* something out.

Branwen had left it on the bench in the tack room, on the left side, not the center where she keeps her own supplies. It's wrapped in waxed cloth and tucked on the edge of the bench where she sometimes took her meal: a thin strip of dried hare and half a boiled egg, salted. Simple trail food, meant to last in a pouch for days. Not a meal, not even enough to truly fill a belly, but something.

It's not a gift. She didn't do gifts.

It's just something… there. Something that can be overlooked or taken. Some food that can be ignored.

Branwen doesn't watch him outright. But she hears the sound of him

in the adjacent stall, the little scuff as he moves. Then— *Grrrk*.

This time it's louder. And longer.

Her hand pauses mid-rub on a bridle strap. Her mouth presses flat. Branwen edges back, looking at him. It's brief, but it's enough. His back is turned, but she sees the way he clutches his stomach, the way his spine bends in on itself like something trying to disappear. Gods know what they're feeding the houseboys lately. Not a lot, apparently. A scrap of toast at best.

She continues with her work. The minutes drag on, but she listens. There is no movement toward the tack room and no crinkle of cloth. Eventually, she hears him gather his things quietly and slip away.

The meat remains untouched. Branwen waits until he is gone, then steps into the tack room herself. The square is still there, neat as a shrine. She stands over it for a moment, then lets out a soft grunt, more breath than voice, and runs a hand through her hair.

"A doormat *and* a fool, then."

She picks up the dried meat and stares at it. Her stomach isn't rumbling, but she takes a bite anyway, as if to erase the gesture. It tastes flat. Outside, the dogs start to bark at a passing cart. She whistles to settle them, but her eyes linger toward the door Jonas had disappeared through.

Like a stray dog, she thinks, *One of those skittish ones that won't let anyone close. Won't take a scrap unless you turn your back and pretend not to see.*

She's seen hounds like that before. Not the pedigreed ones, those were bred to trust hands and praise, but the mutts that turned up half-starved at a fencepost, ribs sharp, ears flat, and with eyes that never quite meet your own. You didn't reach for dogs like that. You left out a bone and walked away.

Sometimes they came back. Sometimes they didn't. Either way, you didn't chase.

The tack room smells of old leather and pine soap, familiar as breath. After she's done eating the meat and egg, Branwen's fingers hover over the empty space where the parcel sat. She wipes it clean with the edge of her sleeve, more harshly than needed, until the bench shines.

She doesn't know how long he's been here, but she's fairly certain he's been in The Lady's service for a good couple of years. And yet, despite that, he's too soft for this place. *Too* obedient, if that's possible. All those tasks and no one guarding his ribs or keeping his bowl full. A kindness would spook him, she knows that much now. But still, the thought scratches around her.

She'd rather not be thinking about him. She didn't come out this early to start her day wrapped around other people's problems. And yet he lingers in her mind.

"Stupid," she mutters.

She doesn't know whether she means him, or herself.

Her name is Mirelda Amaranthe, though none but her oldest friends or

the occasional letter from court dare use it. To the staff, the neighbours, the land, and the gossip pages, she is only ever *The Lady*.

The Lady is not a tall woman. Not broad-shouldered, not steel-voiced. Her figure is slight, delicate even, like it had been sketched out with a fine quill and never revised. Yet rooms hush when she enters. Servants still themselves. Even children, too young to understand power, sense something in her and go quiet. She does not walk; she *arrives* , each step a quiet decree.

She is past sixty, though only the faint creases at her mouth and the paper-thin skin at her throat give it away. She doesn't make much conversation, and speaks softly when she does, never needing volume, only precision. The sort of woman whose disapproval is not voiced, only *felt* — a pause with the tightening of a jaw.

Branwen has never once heard her raise her voice.

Three children. All grown. All elsewhere but they visit frequently enough for Branwen to imagine them as vultures for her estate. The youngest, her only son, is married to a trade magistrate and likes to come home for Covenant Day dinners and occasional estate reviews. Which is funny, because men can't legally inherit or own property. The middle child is a botanist who had the gall to name a weed after herself and present it to the Royal Horticultural Council. A scandal, if it were by anyone not related to The Lady. The eldest is a Tide Theorist, someone who studies tidal patterns. Apparently she's essential to naval operations and agricultural rhythms. Branwen has never seen the ocean except in paintings, but she knows first hand how unpredictable waves can be. The eldest's job makes her skin crawl.

The Lady has been widowed nearly twenty years, though few spoke of him now, not out of scandal, but disinterest. Her late husband had been a quiet, neat-footed man with a fondness for rare teas and moth collecting, and was apparently quite adept at embroidery. He'd spoken

rarely in public and never without deference, as was expected of a husband in such a match. Some said he had been ill for years before the end, others claimed he had simply faded like wallpaper in a home that no longer needed it. There were no cruel whispers of mistreatment. The Lady is not known for unkindness, only precision. She had married well enough for her station, produced the requisite children, and worn her widowhood like she wore her mourning ring: cleanly, without fuss, and without invitation for pity. Though, Branwen can take a guess *why* she doesn't remarry. She's seen some… interesting things, but that's neither here nor there.

Branwen had once taken a passing interest in the Lady's late husband, not out of gossip, but out of curiosity. He'd been the son of the Royal Games Architect, of all things. A position that sounded half-fairy tale, half-farce: designing riddles, ceremonial trials, and elaborate strategy games meant to shape the minds of noble children and officers-in-training. Branwen couldn't decide if it sounded more like wizardry or circus work. She'd once glimpsed a pamphlet from the capital describing one of his mother's inventions— a gaudy rotating board meant to teach battlefield logistics through coloured tokens and tiny wooden cannons. Ridiculous, all of it. Like training a show pony to play chess, or teaching hounds to bow on cue. And yet, he'd been important enough to marry into the Amaranthe line. Branwen supposes even the most useless bloodlines had their place, if they were clever enough at playing pretend.

Branwen hears the click of hooves echoing back through the gravel path as she returns to the stables. The Lady had just finished a promenade with the Countess of Whitecairn, an elegant woman with a voice like cold silk. Two maids trail them with parasols. The Lady has quite a few guests today, but they're mainly in the house.

The Lady is as composed as ever, her riding boots polished to an ink-black shine, posture held in elegant defiance of age. Her braid, silver-streaked and glossy, is pinned into a coronet at the back of her skull, not a strand out of place. The gloves on her hands are plum velvet, tailored precisely to the long, slender shape of her fingers, like she had been born not to work, but to gesture.

Branwen keeps her head bowed just enough, her steps angled just so. She's just part of the landscape. A working woman with a damp bridle in one hand and the vague stink of horse-sweat on her collar. No one gives her a second look. That's the trick of it.

Still, she watches.

The Lady rides a white mare that gleams like polished milk, all fitted silver tack and trimmed mane. The woman smells like lilacs and something even finer under that, civet or musk root or one of those perfumes that only come in glass flacons delivered from the Inner Cities.

It makes her jaw tense. Not from the scent itself, but what it means.

They all smelled like that, the noblewomen. Sugar, flower-water, faint ghosts of things plundered and powdered into oils. The kind of smell that hovers like a statement. *I don't touch dirt. I don't sweat. I don't kneel.*

Branwen had kneeled. Plenty.

"Marshal," The Lady says coolly after dismounting, as if Branwen is the help— which she is— but not exactly. A marshal-tier woman like her isn't house staff. She may handle dog and horse shite, but she doesn't scrub chamber pots or place sugar lumps in tea. She trains beasts to hunt and for other blood sports, and sometimes breeds them so that The Lady can sell them. And that means she sits above the boys in aprons but still below any woman who has never cleaned her own fingernails.

"You might tell the stablehands to oil the gates before next week's party," The Lady adds, turning her head just enough to not look Branwen in the eye. Now that spring is arriving, that means the creatures in the forest are going to be subjected to hunting parties.

"Aye," Branwen mutters with just enough nod to not get called insolent by The Lady's guest.

And that's the end of it.

Branwen doesn't envy noblewomen. She doesn't want their glinting little shoes or hair that smells like roses. She just hates how they stink of fancy perfumes that make her nose itch.

She returns to the stables sometime near dusk, the sky barely blue anymore, just chalk dust and the far edge of cloud. One of the guests had forgotten a crop, and she didn't trust any of the stablehands or houseboys not to misplace it.

That's when she sees him.

Jonas is curled up quietly near the east stall, where Branwen and the stablehands store grooming supplies. He's not quite sitting, nor standing.

She sees him before he sees her.

The food she'd left, just a stick of dried meat this time, is untouched on the bench just beside him. Branwen's mouth pulls tight.

At first she thinks, *Fine. Let him starve if he's too prideful.* But *no.* That isn't right. She knows that kind of pride. It isn't pride so much as fear. She'd had it once, too.

She was seventeen, new to noble houses and not yet employed by The Lady. Some steward's girl had left a platter of fig tarts on the corner table by the stables. Branwen had thought it was a kindness. She'd taken one. *One.* She'd been caned on the backs of her arms so hard she couldn't brush a horse for three days.

Branwen doesn't want Jonas thinking *she* is testing him. That she was like *them.* She can still smell that fucking perfume in her nostrils.

He hasn't noticed her yet, so she clears her throat once, loud enough for his head to lift. His eyes dart to hers, then quickly away.

Branwen nods at the bench, "It's for you," The words are gruff and not soft. She isn't good at *soft.*

He outright *flinches* at her.

Then he hesitates. That's her first clue.

If she didn't speak to him he probably would have stayed silent for the whole day. No surprise there. But now, after she's spoken to him directly, the silence stretches too long. Not the kind that comes from rudeness, or even nerves, but from a deep reluctance. Like dragging a stone uphill just to force the words out. He's stiff, spine locked, eyes flicking to her and then away again, like he's weighing whether to speak at all.

But she's addressed him, and men are supposed to speak when spoken to, especially to a woman who outranks them.

"I-I—I'm n-not—" He starts, then stops. His voice is thin, papery, like it hasn't been used in a while.

His hands move as if they might help him finish the sentence. One twists into the edge of his apron, tugging tight. The other flutters up like it might swat at the air, uncertain and stuttering just like the words he's choking on.

"I-I—I di-didn't m-mean to—"

He cuts off again, his mouth still open, jaw twitching slightly as though the rest of the sentence is trapped behind his teeth, battering against his tongue. His throat bobs with a hard swallow.

Branwen doesn't interrupt. She's seen animals like this before: half-wild, skittish with a wound you can't see. You let them bolt and you'll never get them back. You press too hard, and they shut down entirely.

His shoulders hunch inward, as if trying to make himself smaller. His gaze skitters across the floor, the walls, her boots— anywhere but her face. The silence stretches again, heavy with effort.

It's not shyness. Not really.

It's a fight just to speak.

Then finally, like drawing water from a dry well: "I—th-thought—"

He squeezes his eyes shut, “I th-thought I wasn’t—wasn’t s-supposed to t-t-touch it.”

The words spill out in a rush, uneven and raw. He breathes hard at the end, like forcing them through cost him something.

Branwen doesn’t say anything at first. Just looks at him, really looks. He’s pale at the temples, his jaw clenched too tight. Chestnut hair mussed like he’s been tugging at it, and his eyes are wide with panic. That same boyish face she remembers from a glance, but now it’s lined with something else. Fear, maybe. Definitely some shame.

All over a scrap of dried meat.

Her jaw clenches, “...Just food. It’s not a trick. Eat it or don’t. But I’m not going to cane you, if that’s what you’re fretting about.”

Branwen thinks briefly about saying something else. Like *you look like you’re going to fall over.* Or *your ribs are probably showing.* Or even *you shouldn’t let them work you to bone and breath like this.*

But she doesn’t.

Instead, she turns back toward the stall and says over her shoulder, “I don’t leave scraps for dogs. I leave food for people,” Then she leaves him there, alone with the bench and the meat and whatever ghosts make him flinch like that.

She’s halfway down the corridor between the tack room and the hay store when she starts thinking about it again. His voice— she’d never heard it before, but here just moments ago he was trying with some

considerable effort to get a sentence out. Branwen isn't sure if she's going to hear him speak again after that.

It's abundantly clear that his voice doesn't come out right. It halts and snags, like each word was something he had to pry loose with splinters beneath his nails. That stutter, the way his hands had twitched like he wanted to speak with them instead. It's the kind of difficulty you don't fake. The kind that makes even simple answers feel like wading through river mud.

It hadn't shocked her, exactly. She'd met enough quiet men to know silence could mean many things: obedience, caution, or pride. But this isn't silence by choice. This is a boy with a cage in his throat. And yet he'd still answered her. Pushed it out, stammer by stammer, just because she'd spoken first.

Branwen sits on the tack bench, elbows braced on her knees, and runs a thumb over the grain of the leather she'd been mending. The sun is lower now, casting long gold slats through the stable slats. Outside, the birds are quieting down, and somewhere behind the kennels, a wheelbarrow creaks and dumps.

She exhales through her nose.

Poor bastard.

Not just for the stutter, but for how it seems no one in the household thought twice about loading their chores on him, letting him take the weight and never once look up. The kind of boy you can walk over without noticing you'd done it. She isn't softhearted. That's what she tells herself. But something about the way he'd tried to speak, like he thought he wasn't allowed to, scrapes under her ribs and settles there.

She hates that.

She doesn't want to think about the sound of a boy's voice. That's *dangerous business.*

Especially one who flinches like that.

Especially one who looks so *damned tired.*

Jonas walks back toward the estate, the bundle of dried meat pressed against his chest like contraband. Tree branches rattle in the windless hush, that strange stillness before the land fully folds into night.

He knows better than to eat on his feet, especially outdoors. *Men do not graze.* That was in *The Book of Gentlemenly Conduct* , under the chapter *On Poise and Presentation* . There'd even been a small ink drawing of a man walking upright, hands clasped at the small of his back, eyes humbly lowered. No crumbs on his lapel and no chewing like a dog.

But he's starving.

He takes small bites. He turns his face slightly to the woods, so any passing servant making last minute errands might think he is just shielding from the wind. He chews carefully, making sure to swallow before he rounds any corner. He does not let himself *enjoy* it.

His mouth still aches from the effort of speaking. He hadn't meant to

— *hadn't wanted to*— but she'd looked at him, and once a woman speaks, a man is supposed to answer. That's the rule. That's the rule even when your throat closes and your hands forget what they're doing and every word feels like walking barefoot over glass. He can still feel the heat in his cheeks from it, the way his tongue caught and jerked against his teeth, betraying him in front of her.

And yet… she hadn't looked at him like the others did. Not amused or even annoyed, really. She even waited and let him finish speaking. Jonas can't remember the last time he wasn't interrupted.

He tears another bite from the meat with careful, aching teeth. The salt stings the inside of his mouth, but he doesn't care. He's too tired to care. His jaw works in slow rhythm as he walks, keeping to the shadows, the way he always does. He focuses on chewing, swallowing… Remembering to breathe.

Talking is exhausting. Letting someone hear him is infinitely worse.

But the meat is warm in his chest, and for the first time in a while, something in him loosens. Just a little. Not that that lasts very long, whatever relief he feels is quickly replaced by something else, something heavier.

Through a side window, lamplight spills out in rectangles of amber. Inside, two male attendants sit on a cushioned bench, one threading golden floss through an embroidery hoop with methodical care, the other reading *The Book of Gentlemenly Conduct* , one finger following each line as his lips move silently.

Further along, a young man in estate livery stands beside a mirrored cabinet, practicing how to pour tea from a heavy silver pot. His brow is furrowed in concentration, tongue peeking slightly from his lips. He adjusts the angle of the spout again, and again, watching the liquid

arc smoothly into a waiting cup without a single splash.

Jonas slows as he passes, unseen behind the hedgerow. Each window offers another glimpse: boys bent over dance cards, a chorus class rehearsing vowels in harmony, a footwoman tracing calligraphy at a sloped desk, tongue pressed to her teeth as she copies ceremonial names. It's a busy evening, and he was part of none of it. All the chores everyone gave him prevented him from being involved in the preparations for what it's inside.

It's not like he would have been playing cards or doing embroidery anyway… He's too low-ranked for that. But Jonas cannot help but feel something sharp in his chest.

They are inside. They belong to that world.

Jonas lowers his eyes and continues walking. There is no lighted window for him. No soft-edged routine or well-padded room. Only the narrow path back to servant's quarters, the scent of thawing earth, and the quiet burn in his ribs as he swallows the last bit of dried meat.

Perhaps it's because Jonas had seen a servant reading *The Book of Gentlemenly Conduct,* but he makes a detour to the servant's hall, near the warming hearth. There are shelves of small books bound in green cloth and he simply just… looks at them. *On the Dignity of Service* , *Hosting with Grace* , *Refinements for the Well-Kept Husband.* And the dreaded slim volume he'd once tried so hard to master: *Hushed Elocution.*

Speak as a bloom in winter: gentle, hushed, unfurling only when prompted.

He'd tried, a long time ago.

But his words came with catches and thorns, trembling on his tongue, often refusing to land at all. He'd failed those lessons. Other boys had learned to fold their hands and say *Yes, ma'am* like music. Jonas had trembled and gone red, unable to get the words out without stumbling or choking.

A *delicate flaw* , they called it. Not a scandal, but *pitiful.* A mark of weakness in a man meant to soothe and assist. And so he made himself useful in silence. That at least, he could do.

Perhaps he wanted to read something here, not that he would be able to with how his eyelids droop heavily. Jonas doesn't remember anymore. So he returns to walking back to the servant's quarters.

Another errand. Another walk to the stables.

Jonas's feet throb with every step. His left heel stings like it's been branded— he knows the blister there split open sometime in the night, and now the back of his stocking is stiff with dried blood. He hadn't dared take his boots off since then, terrified they wouldn't go back on if he did. The leather bit into raw skin with each movement, a dull throb that's beginning to feel fevered.

The morning is bright and cold, damp with meltwater. Thin light spills over the stable yard, pooling in ruts and hoof-prints. Somewhere in the trees, a wood dove calls and is answered.

Inside, the Hunting Marshal is already at work.

She has her sleeves rolled up and her arm deep in a hay bale, muttering under her breath as she wrestles out a bundle for the stallion in the end stall. Her braid is coming undone, and a bit of straw sticks out of it like a stray feather. There's a line of oil on her forearm, dark and gleaming.

Jonas flinches when she speaks. He hadn't expected her to speak to him again— and so soon. Her voice cuts through the soft murmur of hounds and rustling straw.

"You look like death's valet," She says without looking up, "Sit down. You're going to fall over."

He freezes. His mouth opens but nothing comes out at first. His hands fidget uselessly at his sides.

"I— I-I—sh-shouldn't—" He stammers. His tongue feels thick, too large for his mouth. Heat floods up his neck to the tips of his ears.

The Hunting Marshal glances over at him. Not unkindly. More… matter-of-fact. Like she's weighing the situation and finding it not worth fighting over.

"I won't tell," She says bluntly, "If someone asks, I'll say you're doing something for me."

Then she levels a look at him that makes his stomach turn over, it's solid and dry, "And don't bother arguing with someone bigger than you."

Jonas blinks. He opens his mouth slightly, but no sound comes out. The words land strange on his ears… He's not used to being spoken to like that. Like a person who might *argue*. Like someone allowed the possibility of protest. He doesn't know what to do.

Done with moving hay, she turns back to the saddle strap she was probably oiling. The conversation, apparently, is over.

Jonas stands there a moment longer, uncertain. But his legs are trembling. His boots feel like stone. He finally sinks onto an overturned crate near the wall, lowering himself with a wince. It's not a chair, not proper, but it's low and out of the way. Safe enough.

He draws his knees in, arms wrapped loosely around them. His whole body aches. His spine hums with fatigue. He can feel the heat of the stables curling around him, warm hay, animal musk, oiled leather, the iron tang of the Hunting Marshal's sweat and saddle soap. None of it is perfumed or clean, not like the guest halls or embroidery rooms, but he doesn't mind.

I shouldn't.

His eyes, against his will, begin to drift shut.

I really shouldn't. I have chores to do.

Just a moment, he tells himself. Just to rest.

Only five minutes.

He lets his cheek rest against his knees, and the last thing he sees before sleep begins to pull at him is the curve of the woman's back as she bends again to her work.

Jonas doesn't sleep. Not really.

He drifts, half-dreaming, half-listening, to the sounds of the Hunting Marshal moving about the stable: leather shifting, hooves occasionally stomping, the scrape of straw against stone. Her presence is steady and unbothered. She doesn't speak to him again.

He stays curled in on himself, legs pulled up, arms crossed tight across his chest like he can fold himself smaller, disappear into the slats of the crate. The wood is hard, but it is off his feet. That is enough.

The blister on his heel burns like a brand. It's split open now, flesh rubbed raw. The back of his stocking is stiff with blood, dried in a pattern that's begun to chafe anew with every shift of weight. The boot is a trap, but he endures.

He'd long since stopped thinking of his voice as something he could fix. Books like *Hushed Elocution* or *Gentle Tongues for Gentle Sons* had only taught him how to fail more politely.

Instead, Jonas believes, quietly, fervently, the way children believe in old superstitions, that his stutter is a mark. It was a thing he earned.

He remembers the first time he saw the *Shadow Crossing* for what it was after his grandparents told him about it, a ragged slit of moving darkness skimming the edge of a doorway, flickering where light

should not shift. He was six. Not quite old enough to fear it, but just old enough to know it did not belong… Perhaps it's a ridiculous thing to continue believing now, but it feels like an anchor to Jonas. Back then, however, the room felt emptied of air.

He was *very* late to begin speaking as a child. And when he did, the stutter manifested. Not all at once. First a catch. Then a faltering. Then full stops, panic swelling in his throat like he'd swallowed bees. And it only got worse— with shame and with failed practice that only seemed to train his mouth into knots.

He remembers the elders in the village square whispering about boys marked by omens. Boys who stepped through thresholds at the wrong hour. Boys who didn't tie iron by their beds. Boys who looked up when they should've bowed low.

Folk wander at this hour, thin as smoke and just as hard to see, slipping through doorways like spilled water. If they caught your shadow as you crossed a threshold, they'd follow you, curl up in your bedclothes, muddle your speech, make the butter spoil, and call your name from dark corners.

He must've stepped on a shadow at twilight, a long time ago.

…*muddle your speech*…

It's easier to believe he is cursed than broken.

Broken could be fixed. And he'd tried. Gods, he'd tried.

But cursed… cursed is different.

Cursed is *inevitable.*

She hears the voices before she sees them, one tight and prissy, the other barely audible.

"…If you're going to skive off, at least do it somewhere less visible, Jonas. Honestly. A stablehand told me she saw you lying about with your feet up when there's actual work to do…"

Branwen rounds the corner with a bucket in one hand, the clatter of her boots sharp and deliberate on the stone. The scent of The Lady's perfume still clings to the walls behind her, cloying and sweet like rot left too long in a jar. She's just come back from delivering a gelding to some velvet-draped noble who didn't know how to hold reins properly, and her hands are raw from leather, her shoulders knotted and her patience already worn to threads.

The scene unfolds in the side yard, just past the kennel door. Jonas stands stiffly, hunched in the shadow of a narrow beam of light, shoulders drawn tight and his chin tucked down. His hands are balled into fists around the hem of his apron, pulling the linen taut. He looks like he's bracing for something. Across from him is another servant, Merrill— sour-faced, hawkish, smug in the way of men who enjoy being obeyed and don't notice when they are endured instead.

Those maids from a while back haven't been the only ones she's since heard speak about how *great* Jonas is at doing everyone else's jobs. She's heard some houseboys make him the butt of the joke, and has seen Merrill offload some minor inconvenience onto Jonas more than once in passing. Firewood, kennel scrub, larder haul, feed change, window cleaning, laundry… Branwen's seen it all at this point. Half

the estate has. And now this dullard is scolding the boy for having the gall to sit?

Jonas doesn't speak. He opens his mouth once, then shuts it again. His jaw moves like he's working up to it, but the words don't come. His entire body looks caught between apology and retreat. It makes something in Branwen tighten.

Her molars grind together.

"Oi," she says. The word lands like a dropped hammer.

Both men jump. Merrill turns, startled, already shifting into the flustered posture of someone caught doing something small and mean. Branwen lifts her chin, her tone flat but ringing.

"That how you speak to someone who's done half your week's work already?"

Merrill blinks, then straightens and folds his arms, "I— I wasn't speaking to you, Marshal."

"No, you weren't. You were speaking to him. And badly."

She steps forward. Not fast, but just enough to make Merrill shift his weight. Jonas flinches and takes a small step back. She notes it.

"You think I haven't noticed?" She says, "All your sweet little favours? *'Jonas, be a dear and scrub the yard troughs,' 'Jonas, take my larder shift,'*

‘Jonas, the chamber pot’s tipped again.’ You’ve been shoving every unpleasant thing on him like he’s your bloody footstool.”

Merrill flushes, already reaching for protest, “It’s not against custom to share—”

“Share?” Branwen raises an eyebrow, “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

She takes another step, and this time Merrill edges back. Her voice drops, not quieter, just heavier.

“Looks more like working a dog until his ribs show.”

That one lands. Jonas stiffens beside her, and she can see his throat move as he swallows hard. She doesn’t look directly at him yet. Her attention stays fixed on Merrill.

“If he looks like he’s about to drop dead, it’s because people like you treat him like a spare broom and then tut when he falls over.”

Merrill opens his mouth again, probably to sputter something about hierarchy or duty, but Branwen moves once more and her shadow stretches across him. She’s taller. Broader. And she’s not pretending to be pleasant.

“How about I report you for neglect? Let’s see how The Lady feels about a servant who can’t carry a quarter of what he’s assigned without farming it out.”

Merrill hesitates. The moment stretches, awkward and brittle. Then he mutters something— too low to catch— and scurries off, boots tapping faster than they need to as he vanishes around the corner toward the estate.

Branwen doesn't turn to Jonas right away. She watches the spot where Merrill disappeared, jaw still clenched, before finally glancing aside. Jonas hasn't moved. He stands like he's afraid to shift his weight. His face is turned slightly away from her, but not enough to hide the colour in his cheeks or the faint glassiness in his eyes. It's not quite tears, not yet. But something close to breaking. Something held too tight for too long.

"...You should eat more," She says, voice rough as she tries to figure out where to go from here. She hadn't quite planned this far.

Jonas nods. It's too fast, like a bobbing puppet. He doesn't meet her eyes. His hands are still clenched.

She exhales and scrubs a hand back through her sweat-damp hair. The knot in her shoulders doesn't loosen and she's already regretting getting involved, but not enough to take it back.

"Next time someone pulls that shite, use your voice," She says, then grunts when she quickly realizes why he doesn't do just that, "Better yet, don't wait for next time. You don't owe anyone your bloody spine, boy."

Jonas finally looks up. Just for a heartbeat.

Branwen doesn't flinch. Doesn't soften, either. But something in her jaw shifts, and she turns to walk back toward the kennels without another word.

The bucket in her hand sloshes as she goes. The water smells faintly of hay and salt.

Branwen only makes it a few steps before she stops. Something nags at her, catches in her chest like a spur in wool. She looks back over her shoulder. Jonas hasn't moved. Still standing there like he's afraid he'll be punished just for being seen.

"It's Branwen, by the way," She says, like she's tossing the words over a fence. She's not quite looking at him.

Jonas blinks, startled. She sees it.

She doesn't know why she said it. Most of the others don't use her name unless they're barking orders or whispering gossip. She prefers it that way. No room for confusion. No risk of being mistaken for kind. But something about the way he stands there, still silent, ribs barely moving… She just doesn't like it. Or she does. That's the problem.

She clears her throat roughly, as if to shake it off.

"You're not any use to The Lady dead, you know," Her voice is gruff again, words scraping out like bark, "Even if you act like you are."

Then she keeps walking.

It isn't until the next morning that Jonas realizes something has shifted.

Not loud or boastful… Just there, like how sunlight creeps across a floor in the early hours.

The first sign is in the kitchens.

He walks in, half-expecting someone to point at a stack of plates or bark his name before he's even crossed the threshold. But no one turns. No one presses a broom into his hands. No one "remembers" halfway through their own duties that something must be delivered, fixed, scrubbed, fetched— and that surely Jonas wouldn't mind.

He almost doesn't notice at first. He's too tired. Still half-braced for Merrill's shrill voice, or for someone to nudge him toward a slop bucket.

But then he sees it.

Tacked to the pantry wall is a new chore chart, freshly inked in Maud's familiar, slashing script. There's an angry red notice scrawled across the bottom:

Absolutely NO swapping of tasks or trying to make someone else do it. Reassignments are final. Further infractions will be reported.

Jonas stares at it, heart fluttering with something too shaky to be called relief. His name is there, yes, but it's all so… Manageable. He's even still on kennel duty, but only twice a week. There is no overlapping scrawl where other names have been scratched out and

replaced with his. No extra shifts in the scullery. No doubled tasks.

He blinks. Then blinks again. For a full minute, he's not sure what to do. He simply stares for a while.

Eventually, he makes his way to the long servants' table. He sits. Not hunches in a corner, not perches half-on a crate while balancing a tray. He *sits*. He gets both hands on the bowl, and no one calls him away mid-mouthful. No one shoots him a pointed look like he ought to be somewhere else.

He eats breakfast. The *whole* thing.

He even has time to finish the crust.

His jaw works slowly, chewing without urgency. His fingers curl loosely around the bowl's rim. It feels... strange. Not wrong, but unfamiliar, like putting on a coat and realizing it finally fits. The ache behind his eyes, the one that had clung to him like fog for the past week, begins to ease. By midday, he has stopped twice just to sit. *Sit,* not collapse. Not nap where no one can see. Not hide in a dark alcove, knees to chest, counting his own breath to calm the frantic rhythm of his pulse. Just sit.

And it isn't a dream. He knows the difference. It's not some spell that will vanish if he glances the wrong way through a *Shadow Crossing*.

The Hunting Marshal must've spoken to Maud.

It seems like such a ludicrous thought, but it must surely be true. He sees Merrill, across the courtyard, hunched over the ash bins. Maud is

watching him. Arms crossed and lips thin. Merrill looks like he wants to cry.

Jonas doesn't feel sorry.

The knot in his chest loosens a little more.

But most of all, he keeps thinking about her.

"It's Branwen, by the way," she'd said.

He hadn't known what to do with that. He still doesn't. No one offers him their name. No one speaks for him. But she did. And not just with the sharpness of her voice or the threat behind it.

She saw. And then gave him something he didn't know how much he needed: space. Space to breathe and to rest. He doesn't know what to call the feeling that coils in his chest when he thinks of her.

But it's warm. And that terrifies him.

It's only right that he thank her.

He's been turning it over in his head since breakfast. Since sitting. Since breathing without flinching. A proper thank-you, not just the way he ducks his head or rushes to complete some small task in

exchange, but *words.* But that won't come easy. Jonas nearly gives up and decides to simply not do it several times over, but a niggling feeling prevents him from actually going through with that. A need to say something, urgent and insistent. He *must* do this. If only because he's still on kennel duty, which means he'll keep seeing her to some degree.

He tells himself that if he waits too long, it'll sour. She'll think he's ungrateful. Or worse…That he hadn't noticed what she did for him at all.

So, on break— and that still astonishes him… *a break* , a *real one* — he crosses the pasture toward the far fence line, where he spots her among a loose knot of stablehands. There's a tall girl with straw-colored hair tossing feed, someone else fixing a bit of tack, and Branwen, squinting into the sun as she rubs down one of the mares.

But already, before he even reaches her, he can feel the weight of the words forming wrong. Heavy in his throat, like stones that won't roll smooth no matter how he angles his tongue. It's always like this, harder when he *means* it. When it's *real* .

His feet crunch the gravel path. His mouth goes dry. He stops just short of her, hands twitching at his sides, unsure whether to speak or wait for her to notice. He tries not to think about how foolish he must look, just standing there.

He opens his mouth. Then closes it again. His tongue sticks. His lips start the motion of a word— then abort. His whole body tightens. *Say it. Say something. Just thank her.*

She notices him, eventually.

Branwen glances up, wiping sweat from her brow with the back of her arm, “You lost?”

Her voice is blunt, but not cruel. Jonas shakes his head quickly, heart kicking like a struck drum.

“I j-j-just… I—I—w-w-wanted…”

He cringes inwardly. There it is, the hitch. A crack across the surface of whatever small courage he’s mustered. Any moment now, she’ll wave him off. Or worse, laugh. Or sigh. Or try to finish his sentence for him, like most people do, like it’s helpful, like it doesn’t make his stomach twist in shame every time.

But Branwen doesn’t interrupt.

She doesn’t glance away or shift impatiently. She just waits, like it’s *normal.*

Jonas steels himself, eyes locked on the scuffed toe of her boot. His fists are clenched so tight in his apron he can feel his nails press half-moons into his palm.

The mare swishes her tail. A fly buzzes past his ear.

Jonas swallows hard, eyes fixed on a spot near her boot, “…T-to s-say tha–th-thank you. F-for… for b-before.”

He lets the words fall. Like stones, again. But at least he *gets* them out.

A beat passes.

Branwen huffs, not quite a scoff, more a noise to break the tension. She runs her palm down the mare's flank, then shrugs, "Don't mention it," She mutters, "And I mean that. Literally."

Jonas blinks, throat still burning. He doesn't know what he expected, but it wasn't *that.*

She adds, with a sidelong look, "Not much of a soft thing, kid. You go around naming gratitude out loud and people start thinking I'm tender under all this. I'm not."

He doesn't quite smile, but something like it pulls faint at the corners of his mouth.

Branwen tosses the cloth over a fence post and picks up a curry comb. Her voice is almost casual.

"Glad you're still on kennel duty, though. You're decent with the hounds, being all quiet so they don't kick up a fuss. That wasn't just charity."

That lands somewhere deeper than it should. Jonas swallows and nods. A jerky, grateful motion. It's a proper nod, not just that limp movement he does with everyone else.

Jonas leaves the pasture, his steps lighter than they've been in days. The sun is higher now, warm against his neck, and the air smells like

horses and crushed grass. He keeps his head up as he walks, not dragging his heels and not hugging the walls. There's a small smile on his lips and for once, it doesn't feel borrowed or brief.

It feels like something he might be allowed to keep.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

> Thank ye kindly for the first chapter's reception. I have 12 chapters of this mostly written out. Hopefully I can keep up the momentum yeehaw.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The oil lamp burns low, casting a soft amber halo over the small corner Jonas claims for himself in the servants' quarters. A wisp of steam still clings to the rim of his chipped mug, the tea inside long gone cool. He sits cross-legged on the straw-stuffed pallet that passes for his bed, the letter unfolded in his lap, its creases worn soft from handling. For once, he finally has real, uninterrupted time to properly read his brother's words.

He rubs the edge of the paper absently, thumb catching on the seam. It smells faintly of bread flour and wood smoke, the scents of the inn his brother calls home. His eyes scan the ink, though he's memorized every line by now.

Lina's got me painting shutters again. She says blue will charm the travelling gentry, but I think it just makes the place look like a storm tried to dress itself fancy.

That's Eliam, through and through. Humour tucked into bitterness like a thorn in jam. Always the brighter one: taller, cleaner-spoken, better liked by girls. Their mother used to smile and say, *"Eliam was born with honey on his tongue."* She never said much about Jonas's, and neither did their father.

When Jonas's stutter began to bloom into something chronic they'd stopped trying altogether. No talk of tutors. No savings for a dowry.

No hope that any matron might want a husband who couldn't answer his name without flinching. At twelve, he was handed off to service. He had to be useful. That was all.

He reads on.

Lina's cousin is being courted by a farmer's girl in Southwick. A real beauty, they say, even if she works the animals like a brute. Her cousin apparently thinks he's worth more than her. It's funny, Jonas. I pour pour wine in the evenings and stir soup by noon, and I feel like I might be a noble. Lina calls it 'playing dress-up with manners.' I try not to, but I keep wondering what it might be like to really be seen as proper.

Jonas swallows. The flickering lamplight softens nothing.

Eliam's done well enough. Married to a woman with land, a tidy income, and a local name. Lina runs the inn like a captain at sea, and Eliam plays the part: folding linens, carrying trays, washing his hands until they're pink and raw. He reads *The Book of Gentlemenly Conduct* like scripture. He embroiders and he bows. He *tries.*

Jonas knows Eliam means well. He always has, so he tries to not let the next words sting too much.

Lina knows some women in Templemere, more cousins. They own a brewery. One of them's a widow, no children, still young enough to want a man who'll keep house without trouble. You'd make a good husband, I think. Quiet. Obedient. If we push a little, maybe we could get her to take a look at you.

Jonas's fingers tighten around the page. He can almost see Eliam's face as he wrote it, bright with good intentions, that older-brother hope that is like a polished coin clutched too long in the hand. Still

imagining he's Jonas's guide, shepherding him gently into a future that Eliam has already mapped out in fine script and folded napkins.

But Jonas is nineteen now. A late bloom by any woman's measure. Eliam was wed when he was seventeen and Lina would have been… thirty, Jonas thinks.

Unmarried and stuttering. And despite every effort, still unchosen. A soft man without a place is only kept so long as he is useful and what happens when his use runs dry?

He folds the letter carefully and sets it aside. The estate is quiet. Most of the other men have long since retired. Through the half-open door, he glimpses two of them leaning over a sampler, stitching in silence. Another pair thumb through *The Book of Gentlemenly Conduct* , murmuring about the correct incline of a kneel when receiving a wife's instruction.

Jonas can't sew. He can't dance. His stutter made elocution lessons unbearable. He doesn't think he would even kneel the right way.

But he knows how to clean. Maybe that would be enough for someone out there. Marriage was always seen as an inevitability for men and boys. Jonas isn't sure what a union for him would even look like at this point.

And if that's not enough to earn a place in someone's home... maybe that's alright. Maybe. Because he doesn't know what else he'd do if he left. The estate, grand and cold and exacting, has shaped him. Its stones have taught his back how to bend. Its corridors know the rhythm of his feet. Even Merrill's sharp voice has become a kind of fixture, a known cruelty.

Does he *like* the estate? No. That isn't the word, especially not after having so many chores forced upon him.

But he supposes that he *fits* here. Like a key, not quite right, but still turning the lock.

He lies back slowly. He's not going to Templemere. He's not marrying some brewer who probably has sharp eyes and questions about his voice. That is not the path for him, surely. Not that he has any real choice of what his 'path' looks like to begin with. If a woman decides to marry him, he will marry her. So he hopes that if this cousin looks at him, she will ultimately decide that she doesn't want him.

Though that will only make him look more pitiable.

But Jonas doesn't let himself mull over that for too long. He's set to go to the kennels sometime tomorrow. Clean what needs cleaning. Maybe the Hun— *Branwen* will be there. And maybe, not that it matters, he'll let himself look at her a little longer this time. Not out of *want* , exactly. That would be... presumptuous. Improper, even. Men aren't supposed to want. They're meant to be chosen, not to look first, not to *feel* first. Still, something about her, brisk and broad-shouldered and always smelling faintly of hay and hide, stays with him longer than it ought to.

He rubs at the back of his neck, flustered, and tries to shrug the thought off. It doesn't *mean* anything. It couldn't.

But he doesn't sleep yet. Instead, he reaches for the one thing on his shelf that changes from week to week— the discarded copy of *The Genteel Standard* . Issue No. 3,164 – Early Spring Edition. He found this one tucked beneath the ash bin near the scullery stairs, folded over and half-soaked, but still readable once dried. The lamp gutters as he opens it, careful with the damp-crinkled edge.

He's not supposed to read this sort of thing. No man is, really. Not that it's *forbidden* , just… Implied. Like so many things are. He's read all the domestic manuals, every one of them twice over. He's not allowed to read anything from the main library, and no one bothers lending to the stuttering boy in the grey apron. This, after everyone else has lost interest, after the pages have been folded, smudged, or binned; is the only new thing that ever finds him. The only thing that remains new and different for him to read.

He scans the first column, already familiar from earlier in the week:

THE GENTEEL STANDARD
Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661
Issue No. 3,164 – Early Spring Edition

FEATURE: 'Refinements for the Modern Husband' – A New Domestic Curriculum
The Department of Male Education and Refinement has introduced updates to the domestic arts syllabus. From the age of eleven, boys will be taught advanced serviette folding, baking theory, and the latest in silent deference. New additions include 'Nonverbal Appeasement in Marital Discord' and 'Reading Her Expressions: A Beginner's Course.'

"It is imperative," says Matron-Colonel Genevieve Roarke, "that young men understand the core of harmony in the home is his silent, efficient cooperation."

In related news, rising rates of 'improper assertiveness' among commoner men have prompted calls for earlier disciplinary etiquette. Several reformatories now offer 'pre-marital submission intensives' for grooms deemed lacking.

IN SOCIETY: Lady Wynmore is rumoured to have married her fourth husband— a tender sixteen-year-old footman. His embroidery work is reportedly "charming, if not yet exceptional."

ADVICE COLUMN: Ask Matron Lys
Q: My husband asked if he could "lead" prayer at the table. What should I do?
A : Withhold pudding for a week. He'll remember his place soon enough.

Jonas stares at the page.

That's just the way of things, isn't it? The world he was handed and told to fit into. And he has, mostly. He keeps his head down. No one's ever called him improper, yet. The only criticism that has stuck is his stutter. But still… the words in his brother's letter and this magazine settles over him, a quiet sort of weight. Not heavy enough to crush, just enough to press. Like damp air on a wool coat.

He turns the page slowly, carefully straightening a folded corner. There's a comfort in this ritual, the soft rustle of paper, the sweet absurdity of the Society columns, the way Matron Lys always seems so certain. So sure. Jonas has never been so certain of anything in his life.

He reads a little more. Just until the words blur and the page grows warm beneath his fingers. And when he finally lies down again, the corner of the magazine still tucked beneath his hand, there's a strange sort of quiet in him.

He closes his eyes. Sleep doesn't come quickly, but it comes, and that is enough.

Jonas enters the kitchen hall midmorning, a bit earlier than usual. Some of his assigned chores are already done, he double-checks the basin, the sweep pile, the dried pots just in case, but no one has told him to do another's. Not yet.

His fingers twitch slightly at his sides, like they don't trust the free time. He doesn't, either. After a moment's hesitation, he decides to head down to the kennels and stables early. Better to look busy than risk being given something else. Better to keep moving.

The kitchen is noisier than usual. Several of the kitchen boys are gathered at the long prep table, heads bent close together, whispering over the newly revised chore chart. The paper gleams crisp and fresh against the smudged wood, its tidy columns lined with Maud's precise hand. Red ink glints along the margins: more corrections and reassignments. There are many.

Jonas doesn't linger. There's a rule about idle standing. But he catches pieces as he passes.

"No one's allowed to give away their shifts anymore."

"Maud said she'd cane the next man who swaps a pot without permission."

"It's 'cause someone tattled, bet you."

One of the scullions mutters under his breath, bitterly, "All 'cause that mute finally snapped."

Jonas doesn't pause. He just walks on, steady and silent, hands curled

loose at his sides.

Exiting the kitchens, Jonas keeps moving.

The estate is quiet in the way a well-managed household always is in the morning: no raised voices, no hurrying footsteps, just the soft rustle of aprons and the occasional clink of pails being emptied or shutters unlatched. Servants cross the flagstones in measured steps, efficient and wordless, each movement rehearsed to invisibility. Even the birdsong beyond the walls feels secondary to the rhythm of the house.

Near the storerooms, he slows.

A small boy, twelve or thirteen perhaps, stands against the plaster wall, reciting softly to himself. His voice is high and careful, each word shaped with the strained cadence of memorisation.

“I serve with still hands. I speak when spoken to. I bow my head with joy.”

His wrists are bound with soft blue ribbon, neatly knotted in a braid across pale skin. The fabric shimmers faintly. Submission ribbon. It’s not a punishment, but a mark of instruction and discipline. A boy still in tutelage, still being shaped into the sort of man who could serve nobility with grace, quietude, and the sort of humility that makes a person invisible on purpose.

Jonas remembers the weight of his own ribbon.

He’d worn red, which designated the advanced path, a boy chosen

early for indoor duties rather than field labour. The coils had bound him thumb to wrist, a spiral of promise and patience. When he'd carried tea trays or fetched shoes, the ribbon had forced his hands into elegance. Every movement had to be deliberate. One mistake, and the knot was pulled tighter. Two, and he'd go without lunch.

His oaths— *I serve, I speak when spoken to, I bow* — always snagged on his tongue like burrs on wool. The other trainees had called him *Knotjaw* when they thought he couldn't hear.

He watches now as the ribboned boy places a silver dish gently onto a shelf. The boy's movements are stiff with caution. He knows the ribbon will betray him if he rushes. Too quick, too loud, too proud, any of it, and someone would tighten the knot.

Jonas wants to say *it's alright . You'll learn* . But he doesn't. He doesn't think a voice like his would offer any comfort to a boy in training.

He only nods slightly as he passes. A simple acknowledgement of the boy and the ribbon. A silent blessing, if such a thing exists. At least now the boy won't be worked to the bone while still in training. That much has changed, he thinks. Because of *Branwen.*

He wonders, as he walks on, if Branwen realises the impact she's surely had. Not just on him, though the change in his days is nothing short of a miracle, but on the house itself. On the way Maud sharpens her gaze now before assigning duties. On the way boys in training won't have other's chores forced upon them long past supper. On the sudden shift in the air, as if someone, somewhere, had dared to say *enough* .

And all because Branwen spoke. And a Hunting Marshal's words mean a lot.

He wonders if she knows. If she understands the weight of it. Does she know how high she truly is in the servant hierarchy? Does she ever think about the ripple she's set in motion by speaking plainly to a woman like Maud? Does she even *care?*

Maybe she doesn't. She doesn't strike him as the type to waste time on feelings or philosophy. She probably said what she said because it was right, or perhaps just because it annoyed her.

Still. The world feels a fraction more bearable now. Kinder, even though the boys in the kitchen had spat venom. She made that change with what must've been just a few blunt words.

His fingers rub his wool token. He hopes she knows. And if she doesn't, if it never even crosses her mind, well, that's alright too.

The sky has shifted by the time he leaves. It's later morning now, pale and silver-edged, with clouds stretched thin as lace across the light. The kind of morning where the sun hides but doesn't sulk, and the breeze carries the smell of grass and clean water from the troughs.

Jonas takes the long way around the kennels. Not out of laziness, he's never afforded that, but by instinct. Some paths feel safer than others, especially depending on where the sun is in the sky. His grandmother used to say the fair folk never walked in full light, only in the corners of morning and dusk. He already follows the rules of the *Shadow Crossing* strictly, but there are other tales of things hiding in the underbrush and branches. Luckily, it's not a warm morning, so he can avoid shadows comfortably.

Jonas already speaks like someone who's lost half his name. He doesn't need to tempt anything worse.

The air is cool and damp, the kind that settles into his collar. The ground gives a little underfoot, soft from dew and last night's drizzle. The scent of hay, dog fur, and saddle oil lingers thick along the walls of the kennel. The dogs are calmer this time, not silent, but quiet in that particular, respectful way they get when Branwen's passed through recently.

He rounds the corner by the kennel door— And stops short.

Something rests on the ledge beside the feed bin. Tucked behind a coil of rope and a rusting horseshoe. Small. Wrapped in waxed cloth, tied with a bit of yellow string. Jonas's breath catches. He glances around quickly, left, right, behind him. No one. Just the hum of morning and the scrape of a rake against stone somewhere farther off. *It's for you,* Branwen's voice passes through his mind unbidden. It feels like this time, he already has permission.

With cautious fingers, he undoes the knot and peels back the cloth.

A shortbread biscuit.

Not the kind served on porcelain with sprigs of mint in the parlour, but something rougher. Barley flour, he thinks. Maybe a bit of oat. The scent is faint but unmistakable: honey and a touch of salt.

He stares at it. His mouth begins to water.

But more than hunger, it's the feeling that washes over him. A shiver

down the spine, gentle and strange. Not frightening. Just *other* .

This is an offering.

A *sign.*

In his childhood, the elders of his hometown used to say that the small ones— the hearth spirits, the watchers, the kind ones who went unseen— sent tokens to those who needed hope. If you were very tired, or very sad, or working too hard, and something appeared without explanation… You were to take it, humbly, and say:

Grace to the small ones.

He's never dared speak the words aloud, not since he was a child crouched by the fire with snot running down his nose. Not since he learned to be silent where anyone might hear. But today, for once, for the first time in a long while, things have begun to *shift.* Things feel different. Changing.

And so, very softly, with the biscuit cradled in both hands, he whispers:

"Gr–grace t–t–to the s–s-small o-ones."

Then, carefully, reverently, he sits on the edge of the feed barrel and eats.

Branwen doesn't *mean* to linger near the kennels.

She's only come back to fetch a loop rein she left dangling from the post— forgotten, thanks to one of the younger lads who'd insisted on petting *every single dog* . She didn't expect to find Jonas there. He's not doing chores, either, though she's sure that'll quickly change. But for now, he's just… standing.

She pauses behind the corner, instinct stilling her. He hasn't noticed her. That's fine. She doesn't move.

His head is tilted slightly, face turned toward the feed bin with a careful, almost reverent expression. Not his usual tightly-wound, flinching posture. Something softer. She watches as he unravels the waxed cloth she'd tucked there earlier, nothing more than a hunk of coarse shortbread, and sees the faint tremble in his shoulders.

Then he whispers something. His lips barely move, but she catches it. Not the words, at first, just the rhythm and the softness. A murmuring like someone saying grace at a graveside. It takes her a moment to place it through his stutter, but she knows it's some rural thing. A saying. One of the little blessings people in provinces north of where she's from said when a lamb lived through the frost or a roof didn't cave in.

Grace to the small ones.

She nearly snorts aloud, and only just manages to swallow the sound. *Really?*

He's holding the biscuit like it's some kind of offering. Like he's been

touched by the fair folk, or whatever they call it. Like she didn't just throw it together from scraps while the stew was boiling. He thinks it *means* something. Branwen remembers how he hesitated the first time she gave him something, a perfectly good piece of dried meat. He'd looked at it like it was a test and only took it when she told him she wouldn't cane him. But *this* ? The shortbread? Apparently it's divine.

She doesn't get it. And she's not going to ask. Asking would break the spell, wouldn't it?

He eats it slowly, respectfully, as if chewing it is a kind of prayer.

And then she hears it again— his voice. A soft, frayed little stammer. Tripping over each word like it's caught on his teeth. She realises, suddenly, that this might be the most she's ever heard him speak in one go. It's more words than when he thanked her, and he tries so earnestly with every syllable. And even now, it's not *to* anyone. Just to the wind and whatever spirits he believes in.

Something pinches tight behind her ribs.

She's seen lads like him before. Quiet ones. Hesitant ones. They don't last long, usually. They get broken or they grow a spine sharp enough to cut back with. But Jonas… he just seems to keep on. Once again, he reminds her of a stray that keeps coming back to the boot that kicks it.

And he still believes in good spirits.

Gods.

He makes her feel like a bear standing over a sleeping bird. Like if she

breathes wrong, she'll crush him without meaning to. She turns before he can notice her, tugs the forgotten rein loose from the post, and mutters under her breath as she walks away.

"…Sure. Why not. I'll keep leaving the doormat some scraps."

Maybe she'll get more creative next time. Something sweeter. Maybe even warm. Maybe she'll start hiding things in other places.

Not that she'd ever admit that aloud.

She turns back to the dogs, and one of them makes a noise and paws at her stall like she hadn't just seen her an hour ago.

"Yeah, yeah," she murmurs, tugging at her gloves, "You're not the only dumb bastard who needs feeding."

The ladder creaks beneath him.

Jonas pauses at the top rung, the sun just beginning to warm the glass beneath his cloth-wrapped palm. Window duty is supposed to be simple. Dull, maybe, but cleaner work than most. He tries not to enjoy that too much. Any hint of rest or ease has a way of drawing more labour down on his head the moment someone notices, revised chore chart or not. He'll keep worrying about it for a while, he thinks. Perhaps never stop worrying about it.

He dips the rag in the bucket tied to the ladder's side. The water's

gone cold again.

He lifts his eyes to the window in front of him. This one isn't just any pane of glass. Its arch curls at the corners like a knowing grin, and near the peak, a strip of decorative gold filigree catches the late-morning light.

A Mistress's Smile.

Every noble house has them: arched windows carved to suggest a woman's mouth in mid-laugh or mid-command. Jonas's hand slows. He doesn't look in.

Even though this one overlooks a hallway, not a room, he obeys the custom all the same. Boys are warned from their earliest training not to meet their reflection in a Mistress's Smile. Not for too long. Not full-on. The manuals speak plainly: *Keep thy head bowed, thy gaze averted. To see thyself within her domain is to forget the lowliness of thy station.*

It's not in *On the Dignity of Service* , but in the older books, the ones that use words people don't say anymore. *Men of the Hearth* was one. Another, *Steps for the Subtle Husband* , had phrased it differently: *a mirror which turns a man's thoughts toward vanity— therefore sin.*

So he looks away.

Just as he does, motion below catches his eye. It's Branwen, leading one of the younger horses toward the paddock. She's got a halter slung over one shoulder, her hair bound back tight. Her stride is sure. No-nonsense.

She stops mid-step, shades her brow, and squints up at him.

“Why’d you flinch just now?” she calls, voice carrying clean in the open air.

“I—I d-didn’t—” he stammers, freezing against the ladder. His hand tightens on the rung.

Branwen shifts her weight, one hand settling on her hip, “That one’s clean already, unless your arms itch for more than they should. What’s it about?”

Jonas blinks. She’s still looking up at him and… waiting. There is no sneer or scolding. She simply asked him a question. They’re *speaking* , and it feels different. It shouldn’t feel strange, but it does.

He ducks his head, heat creeping into his ears, “I–It’s a… it’s a…” He exhales sharply, “M–Mist–Mistress’s Smi—Smile.”

She squints again, the sunlight catching on the messy strands of hair around her face, “It’s a window.”

He gives the faintest nod and casts a guilty glance at the arch, “I–It’s… n-not s–supposed t-to… l–look t-too long. B–Bo—Boys a-aren’t.”

That earns a raised brow and a half-snort, “Says who?”

He doesn’t answer. He doesn’t need to. It isn’t about who said it. It’s about who never said otherwise.

There's a strange flutter in his chest. Her voice again— it's not unkind or even gentle, but something close to curious. It's beginning to become *familiar*. Is that what this is? A real conversation? He's not used to it. His tongue feels heavy, even after the words are gone. His hands grip the ladder like something might tip at any second.

Branwen rolls her eyes, and her voice drops low as if speaking more to herself than to him, "You really are the superstitious type, huh."

He stiffens, unsure if she's teasing or just… noticing. But there's no laugh behind it. No malice. Just a kind of casual wonder, like she's confirming something she already suspected. She mutters something else he doesn't catch, then turns and moves on, calling something to the horse at her side.

Jonas stays there a moment longer, rag dripping in his hand.

It wasn't much. A handful of words. But they were his.

He isn't sure what to make of that. Only that some part of him— quiet, cautious, not yet ready to name itself— wants it to happen again.

That evening, on his way back from scraping the hearth grates, Jonas passes the servant's mail cubbies. He isn't expecting anything except for maybe another letter from his brother.

But there is something different.

A bit of shortbread, crust fluted like a flower. No note. Just the same handmade wax wrap as before, gently folded with care.

He freezes.

For a long moment, he just stares. Then, carefully, like it might vanish if he moves too quickly, he reaches out and lifts it. It rests in his palm like something rare. Too fine for a place like this. He hadn't expected it a second time, and so *soon.* Branwen had given him dried meat. It was practical and unsentimental, and just vaguely tough enough to say *don't faint on me* in its texture alone.

But *this?*

This has a different shape. A different voice.

There's no reason to think it comes from her. No logic in it. Branwen surely isn't the type to tuck shortbread into cubbies like some hearth-wife from a fireside tale. She has calloused hands and a voice like split wood. She'd already told him she doesn't go soft. Certainly not for him.

This feels like something else entirely.

Once, when he was eight, a charm-woman who stopped through his hometown and gave him a sweet bun tied with twine whispered, *"Leave it at a crossroads, for those benevolent types who also walk in shadows— the small gods and hearth spirits."* He didn't believe her at the time. Not really. Shadows are surely only for the mischievous fair folk.

But the charm-woman touched his cheek and said, *“They see good boys who keep quiet. And sometimes, when the hour is poor, they send someone to help.”* Not unlike what his grandmother also told him.

Now, standing in the corridor, Jonas finds himself wondering.

Maybe… maybe a spirit *has* seen how much he’s been given. How he’s worked. Maybe one crept into Branwen’s boots and nudged her forward. That feels easier to believe than the idea she did any of it on her own.

He finds a quiet spot on the warm side of the kitchen wall, lowers himself carefully to the stones, and unwraps the shortbread like a relic.

It smells faintly of butter and thyme.

He smiles, small and sheepish, and eats it in slow, reverent bites. Not too fast.

He doesn’t want to anger his spiritual envoy.

A week later, Branwen boots open the stable doors before her hands are free.

"Gods, Brenna, that mare bites because you keep backing down."

She strides in, sleeves rolled, hair escaping its knot. One of the stablehands, a stringy-armed girl of maybe fifteen with more nerves than muscle, is holding a brush in front of a chestnut like it might explode.

“I d-didn’t want to startle her,” the girl stammers.

“You don’t startle a horse,” Branwen snaps, closing the distance, “You convince it you’re scarier than whatever else it’s thinking about. Get it together.”

She plucks the curry comb from the girl’s fingers, nudges her aside, and starts brushing in firm, deliberate circles. The mare twitches but doesn’t bolt. Branwen’s voice drops to a dry rasp, “Horses are like men in court, too many nerves, all hidden under silk. Only thing they respect is the woman who walks in like they own the place.”

Not that she’s ever been in a court. Brenna lets out a nervous laugh. Branwen grunts and tosses her a grain scoop.

"Go feed the west pens. And if you drop anything again, I’ll let the dogs lick your boots while you're still in 'em."

The girl scurries off.

Later, Branwen takes her lunch in the tack room, alone. A slab of bread, a mug of broth gone lukewarm, and the *Eastern Courier* . The newspaper is creased, passed hand to hand through the servant halls, but still legible. The headlines are the usual: war, scandal, trade. She flips past the front page and its grainy woodcuts— colonial officers shaking hands with governors in stiff uniforms.

Bounty Blossoms: The Eastern Dominion's Frontier Blooms Again in Maraketh and the Palmed Reaches.

A Hundred New Miles of Sugar Roads!

Native Resistance Quelled: A Cooperative Future Ahead

Branwen narrows her eyes. "Cooperative," she mutters, "Ain't that just the word."

She isn't much for politics. But she can read between lines. One paragraph claims *serpents tamed to pull spice barges* and *men with blue tongues and no words for shame* .

"That's horse shit," she says around a mouthful of bread, "You ever met a serpent? They don't pull nothing. They eat things that pull."

Still, something in her stirs. She's never seen the Palmed Reaches. Or anything outside the Dominion's inner provinces. She was raised on hills and scrubland, drifting village to village with nothing but a satchel and a dog whistle. After the floods took her parents, she just kept walking. Courier work, farmers' horses, a month sleeping in a cart beside a mule and a woman too kind to tell her she snored like an ox.

Then— here. The estate. A lucky break, if she could call it that.

She was seventeen and wind-scabbed when she first walked through the gates. Ten years on, she's Hunting Marshal. There's a badge etched in bronze that she never wears and a room near the kennels where no one tells her how to sleep or who to answer to. Though some of the nobles visiting The Lady still treat her like a saddle stand, something to be brushed past and not seen.

She flips to the gossip page. Not out of interest. Just something to do while chewing. But the headline hooks her.

The Lady and Her Eccentric Garden Guests: Another Day Trip, Another Blush.

Branwen raises an eyebrow.

The tone's polite, but only just. A nasty sort of courteous. The piece describes *The Lady's taste for exotic company* — recent guests from the capital: young men with *"unplaceable accents."* Some were said to be escort-trained in Silken Row, others had *"no known trade but charm."*

It doesn't say the words *foreign* or *prostitute* . It doesn't have to.

Branwen chews the inside of her cheek.

Branwen had seen one of The Lady's *visiting gentlemen* not two months ago. It was just a day visit, with his skin flushed afterward and a strange lift in his step. The man had nodded to Branwen as he passed the stables. She'd recognized him at once.

Three years back, during a trip to town. She'd ducked into a brothel for directions— *just directions*— and there he'd been, leaning in a doorframe with soft eyes and slicked hair. Same smile, same silver tooth. He'd winked at her, and he had money tucked into his unbuttoned vest.

So when he arrived later at the estate, Branwen hadn't judged. Hadn't

said a word. It was no business of hers what a wealthy woman did with her time— or her coin.

She only thought: *Well. At least she pays.*

And she better pay. The Lady has more than enough coin to pay men in brothels. The estate's wealth comes from plum and ashwood trade, and from four textile mills spread across the Eastern Dominion. Branwen had seen the ledgers once, left open by a fussy steward too eager to lecture the kitchen boys. The Lady had a stake in something called the *Elarian Maritime Concern* , and her signature can be found on a half-dozen land grants.

Ships. Mills. Wood. Land. Branwen wonders how much of her wealth comes from the colonies her *visiting gentlemen* are originally from.

It explained the imported spices in the pantry, the rare wine, the silver-leaf napkin rings shaped like swans. It explained the carriages with velvet benches and why servants here wore real wool even in spring. It explained the *freedom* she had to live the way she did.

And that's why never says anything regarding The Lady's taste in men, or about whatever dealings she and her ilk have in politics. Never out loud, anyway. Branwen will vocalize no opinion on it if she can continue to live comfortably. Well, as comfortably as she can, anyway.

Branwen scratches her temple. She folds the paper, finishes the last of her bread, and sighs. She thinks about those girls who were painting by the water, how they mentioned a place that makes your hair silver because of all the salt. The world is always getting louder, stranger, *larger*. Even out here.

Branwen doesn't know how to feel about that.

Jonas has just finished sweeping by the feed sacks when Branwen calls to him over the gate.

“Hey. You— dried-meat boy.”

He startles, looking up like he’s been summoned by both a goddess and a thunderclap. Branwen waves him over with a lazy flick of her wrist, then jerks her thumb toward the stables.

“Brenna’s mucked it up again. Horse’s half-groomed and pissed about it. You’re not busy.”

Jonas glances at the kennel door, he *is* technically still on duty, but Branwen doesn’t give him time to argue. She opens her mouth, ready to bark something else, then hesitates. *Actually* hesitates.

“I mean— shit,” she mutters, rubbing the back of her neck, “I *did* tell Maud the others heap too much on you.”

That small, self-conscious wince catches Jonas off guard. For a second, she looks genuinely embarrassed. She scratches at her temple like she’s trying to erase the moment.

“…How about I ask instead,” She grunts, face scrunched up and looking as though she’d rather be anywhere else, “One of the horses need brushing. You wanna help?”

Jonas almost laughs. Not aloud, he'd never dare, but something in his chest gives a quiet jolt of humour. *Of course* it's different when it's her. So he nods and follows through the corridor. In the stables section of the building, Branwen shows him how to hold the curry comb.

"Not too soft. Not like you're apologizing. Firm, steady. Like you're getting rid of the winter."

Jonas mirrors her grip. The horse— a tall bay gelding with a calm, sideways glance— shifts slightly but doesn't pull away. Jonas brushes in smooth circles. A soft squeak of grit under bristle. After a few strokes, he settles in. His shoulders loosen. The gelding seems content.

"Knew it," Branwen murmurs behind him, "You have still hands."

She then leans against the stall post, arms crossed. Watching. Just… there.

It takes Jonas a moment to realise this is an actual conversation. It's not much. But it *is* something. *Another conversation–!!* Her voice isn't an order. Her eyes aren't calculating his pace. She's just talking to him. Letting him be.

He swallows, nerves tightening as he attempts a reply.

"H-h-h-h… h-hor…horses…"

When he glances back, Branwen is tilting her head, waiting.

“…M-m-m-m-maj—m-majest… majestic.”

She snorts. One sharp bark of a laugh.

“ *Majestic?* They fart and scare themselves.”

Jonas blinks. Branwen pushes off the post and gives the gelding a hearty slap on the rump.

“This one nearly died last week 'cause his own tail tickled him in his sleep. Rolled halfway into the wall.”

Jonas lets out a puff of laughter before he can stop himself. He clamps his lips together almost immediately, shoulders drawing in. He’s not supposed to laugh like that. Not audibly. Not where anyone could hear. Laughing too loudly is unseemly, he’s heard it be called *undisciplined.*

He lowers his head, tries to make the sound vanish into the brush strokes. Like it never happened.

But Branwen actually had a ghost of a grin on her face, full-on and unbothered, like she didn’t mind at all.

“Don’t let the long legs and shiny coat fool you. Horses are dumb as a bag of fence posts. Sweet, though. Like big anxious dogs. But would die if the wind blew the wrong way.”

Jonas ducks his head, brushing still.

"…S-s-still p-pretty," he murmurs.

Branwen grunts and doesn't press. The moment stretches, oddly warm and strangely light, until a voice cracks like a whip across the stableyard:

"Marshal! The Lady's kids showed up five minutes ago! It's time to plan the hunting party!"

Branwen rolls her eyes and says something rude under her breath. She strides past Jonas, all business again, but tosses him a short nod.

"You've got good brushwork. Next time the horse smells like death, I'll fetch you."

Jonas blinks. Half-flattered, half-unsure if she's teasing.

But then she's gone, out into the yard and boots crunching, already barking orders before she's crosses the threshold.

By the time Jonas returns to the main estate, the quiet warmth of the stables has already been scraped away by the noise of the house. It's midday and they're preparing for the first major event of spring, so tasks are shouted across halls. Someone spills lemon water in the guest parlour. A tray of glasses shatters, and one of the younger boys, the one with his wrists bound in training ribbons, stands sobbing quietly

as he sweeps the shards into a dustpan. No one comforts him.

Jonas does what he was taught. He makes himself invisible, small steps with eyes on the floor. He slips into the scullery and sets to laundry with sleeves rolled up and steam fogging the windows. The rhythm of wringing and scrubbing is almost meditative, his mind tucked somewhere quiet.

So when footsteps enter behind him, he doesn't look up. Doesn't speak, even when other servants hush mid-sentence and scatter like mice under a hawk's shadow. He just keeps scrubbing.

"You think you're clever?" Merrill hisses.

Jonas freezes. The laundry hangs limp in his hand. He turns slowly, eyes wide. Merrill stands behind him, arms crossed and jaw set tight. There's a flushed look behind his cheekbones— pride bruised raw. His sleeves are rolled, cuffs still damp, and his voice carries the cutting precision of someone trying not to yell but wanting to.

"Your stable brute friend," Merrill spits, "What— Whispered sweet nothings into the Hunting Marshal's ear? Got her feeling sorry for the boy with the stammer?"

Jonas doesn't answer. Not right away. His grip tightens on the rag. The words are there, half-formed, but he doesn't speak them. He doesn't *dare* . Silence is safer. Silence has always been safer.

But Merrill steps closer, anger bristling off him like static.

Jonas forces his voice out, brittle and too loud in the narrow corridor,

“I-I-I-I d-d-didn’t—”

“Oh shut it, Knotjaw,” Merrill snaps, “Don’t play innocent. We all see it. Chore chart changes overnight, and suddenly *you* don’t touch pot duty. I’m on piss-buckets and curtain beatings while you’re probably warming the Hunting Marshal’s bed.”

Jonas shakes his head hard, throat going dry. He tries again, desperate and cornered.

“I-I-I-I d-didn’t s-s-s-s…”

But the sound collapses halfway. His tongue won’t move. His throat clamps shut. He stares down at the floor, face burning, heart thudding in his ears.

Merrill sneers, “Useless.”

Jonas doesn’t move.

“You’re just like the ones The Lady brings in from the capital. All lashes and whispers and long glances. You know they’re trained to *look* like they want it, right? And when they’re spent, they get sent back. Same as you will.”

Jonas flinches at that. Hard.

Because it’s not foreign. That kind of kindness, the kind that vanishes when it’s inconvenient, he’s seen it. Felt it. Lived through it. From

tutors, from Maud, from visiting noblewomen who only wanted a servant that didn't stumble over yes-ma'am.

Merrill watches him crumble and scoffs. Then he turns and stalks off, muttering curses under his breath, steps sharp and uneven. Like he'd *wanted* Jonas to fight back— but Jonas never does. Never has.

Jonas stays where he is, clutching onto the laundry like it's a lifeline.

The corridor feels cold despite the heat, and everything inside him seems to shrink inward. Merrill wasn't wrong. Not about Branwen. Not really. He *has* to be right, it's the only thing that makes sense. No one's ever come to his defence before. Not even family.

He hasn't done anything to *earn* it now.

He swallows. He falters on his feet and presses his forehead to the wall.

He feels like he's twelve again: ribbons tight around his wrists, kneeling on cold stone, eyes fixed on the cracked shoes of his boyhood tutor, the one who said, " *Some men are born to serve. Others are only born to obey."*

He slips off like a ghost no one bothered to name.

But later, alone in the corridor with nothing but the smell of lye and wet cotton, Jonas touches the edge of his sleeve, where the scent of horse and wax still clings faintly.

He thinks of the shortbread. The handmade wrap. The feeling of it resting in his palm like a promise. Maybe his little spirit, the one who walks in borrowed boots, *did* see him. He hopes it means something. Hopes it's not just a one-time mercy and that his spirit envoy isn't done with him yet.

Maybe, just maybe, it can keep watching. Keep whispering.

And keep protecting him.

He tries avoiding Branwen. For a little while, at least.

Not that he needs to.

She's busy now, wrapped up in preparations for the hunting party. Horses and hounds to get ready, and nobles to remind not to douse themselves in perfume. So he doesn't see her much anyway, which is both a relief— and, to his own quiet shame— a mild disappointment.

Sometimes, when he takes the long route to the linen stairs, he passes the outer hall where the hunting boots dry. Someone's left a half-broken horseshoe perched on a hook. A gift, maybe. Or a warning. Either way, it glints at him with unsettling specificity. Later that evening, tucked behind the starch tin in the laundry cupboard, he finds another shortbread wrapped in wax paper.

No one sees him take it. No one ever claims it.

The next day, he passes by the south gate near the stables and there it is: a crow feather, neatly placed atop the low stone ledge. It's upright, looking like it was intentionally left there. Not dropped, but left.

He stares.

One black quill, glossy in the morning light. A feather is one of the eight signs in *The Little Wardsman's Book of Omens,* something his grandparents read to him . A good one, *"For courage. For protection. For loyal guidance."*

A spirit envoy. It must be another *sign!*

His fingers grip the edge of the wall, heart beating like hooves in his chest.

It *means* something. Even if he didn't understand what. It's been so long since his grandparents told him about good omens. His memory is a bit fuzzy, but he holds onto it nonetheless, because there is surely something stirring in the forests… In *his* favour. His spirit envoy truly isn't done with him yet–!!

He passes the gate again the next morning. No feather this time. Just hoofprints in the dirt, and the distant sound of hounds barking from the fields as they are acclimated to entering the hunting season. He stays. He doesn't know why. He just does, but Jonas doesn't see her. It's not her out there with the hounds. Just some stablehands.

The stables are unusually quiet. The sharp, unhurried rhythm of Branwen's boots is missing. The space without her feels a bit strange. He quietly does what he's meant to do here, just some cleaning. Some sweeping and scrubbing. When Jonas moves to the tack bench, something catches his eye: A thin, green book placed open atop a

crate.

He wouldn't normally dare look over someone else's books, especially not in the main library. But he's not in the house. Rules are different here, so he… just takes a quick peek at the open page.

Stable & Wildlife Notes – For Common and Genteel Readers Alike.

The pages opened to an illustration: a horned creature the size of a horse, covered in mottled red and cream. A long, curling antler sprouted from its brow like an unfurled branch.

1. *Horned Sable-Hind*
   Majestic, antlered females with mottled coats of crimson and cream. Males are antlerless and smaller, used primarily as meat-stock. Sable-Hinds are protected in noble reserves.

There is a note in the margin, that Jonas assumes is Branwen's:

Temperament: smug. Only thing worse than a noblewoman in velvet is a hind in rut.

It's surely Branwen. Jonas huffs, a faint sound. He turns the page.

1. *Blue-Bell Fangsnakes*
   Small, nocturnal vipers often mistaken for garden roots. Bite is rarely fatal to women but highly dangerous to men due to their lower average constitution and slower clotting. Proper estate safety includes warning bells in the underbrush.

Next to it, in Branwen's looping, hard-pressed hand:

Saw one in the grain shed once. Chopped it in half with a soup ladle. Didn't tell the kitchen boys.

He reads more.

1. *The Guttering Moth*
   Named for its wing pattern that resembles candle flame. Males are sterile and often kept as house pets for their gentle glow. Superstition holds that seeing one near your window means a matron of the house is about to make a life-altering decision.

In finer script, someone with handwriting had added:

The Countess of Whitecairn swore she saw three before her daughter's third wedding. Could've been the brandy.

The writing looks older. Perhaps from the previous Hunting Marshal. And then:

1. *Mirewolves*
   Near extinct. Female-led packs once dominated the southern marshlands. The Matriarch's Guard eradicated most after several attacks on hunting parties. Some believe their spirits still roam foggy estates.

Note to House Staff: If a domesticated stallion grows irritable in moonlight, it may be scenting a Mirewolf in the distance. Report to the Hunting Marshal immediately.

Branwen's verdict, plain and simple:

Bullshite. Stallions get irritable when they're bored.

Beneath is an entry added with smudged pencil.

1. *Chimbletails*
   Annoying little shits. Dumb squirrels but taste good over a fire.

Jonas blinks. He shouldn't be reading it. It isn't his.

But her handwriting… it's like hearing her speak from across the room. He can almost picture the shape of her shoulders, the way she leans one hip against a stall wall, arms crossed, half-smiling like she's told a joke only she finds funny… *No,* surely he's being presumptuous now. Men shouldn't think like that.

She isn't even here.

But she *is* . In the annotations. In the pages. In the frayed edges of a well-used book someone cared enough to keep marked and mended. Jonas traces the line under the entry about male constitution being lower. Of course it is. That's what they're taught. Men are soft. Fragile. Spiritually weaker. Prone to bruising. Easy to break.

It's why he's still here— apron-wrapped, careful and slow. Still measuring every step like a ritual.

He leaves the book alone. The silence of the stable seems to thicken

without her. The absence of her boots louder than their presence ever was.

He doesn't know if he was meant to read it. But it feels… permitted.

Not quite another sign.

But close.

Branwen has long held the belief that the worst part of hunting isn't the blood, the dogs, or the beast.

It's *planning* the damn thing.

They've been at it for days now. She sits at the long table in the outer drawing room, boots still streaked with dried manure, her sleeves rolled to the elbow— an offence to propriety that no one bothers to mention aloud because she's the Marshal picked by The Lady. A steward with quill-stained fingers mutters something about hound rotations while two younger attendants, both overly perfumed and undertrained, keep asking where the snack baskets should be placed on the viewing sledge.

"Snack baskets," Branwen mutters under her breath, "We're setting the dogs loose on a screeching slab of fur and you're worried about dainty biscuits and candied plums."

At the head of the table, The Lady lounges in her chair like it's a

throne. She wears her years like fur trim: indulgent, conspicuous and meant to be noticed. A deep burgundy riding jacket clings to her shoulders, and her hair— dark, threaded with silver— is twisted into a netted veil that gleams with garnet pins.

Flanking her are her daughters. Her son isn't around, which isn't surprising. Men are not involved with hunting parties other than as spectators.

The eldest, Lady Alis, is dressed like someone who's always half-ready to board a naval cutter. High-necked tunic, breeches pressed to military crease, and a signet ring marking her as a Tide Theorist. Her eyes are storm-pale and calculating, and her voice is the clipped sort that makes stewards flinch.

"I can't be here long," Lady Alis says, already exasperated, "The coastal readings need recalibrating before the floodlines shift again."

Branwen's jaw tenses despite herself. The eldest always did seem like someone with a stick in her ass.

The middle child, Lady Merevine, is the opposite of her straight-laced sister. She lounges diagonally in her chair, already bored. Ink stains bloom across her cuticles. She's draped in silk and her voice is more drawl than speech.

"I just want something with interesting bones," She says, picking at a plum, "If I'm going to sketch it, I'd prefer not to waste my time on another fox. Or that miserable fang-snake."

"Sketches are for after the kill," Lady Alis says, without looking at her.

“And yours always look like maps,” Lady Merevine snips back.

At the end of the table, The Lady lifts one lacquered fingernail and taps it against her goblet.

“I *do* want the option of sable-hind. The last hunt was terribly uninspiring. I’m sure everyone wants something with… stature this time.”

Branwen bites back a sigh.

Sable-hinds are elegant, yes. But they also kick like demons, and panic hard. One good shriek from a guest and the beast will be over the lowstone wall before the horns finish sounding. No one eats the kills, either. They’re dragged back to the estate, sketched, then forgotten—left to rot while someone’s niece wins a ribbon for *“anatomical realism.”*

“Just be aware, there’s no such thing as a tame hind. They won’t be easy to hunt,” Branwen warns, “But if you want spectacle, you’ll get it. Might come in the form of someone’s eye being gored, though.”

The Lady turns slowly, voice smooth as syrup, “Is that a warning, or a suggestion?”

“Just a truth, my Lady.”

Lady Alis sighs, “Can we please not lose anyone this time?”

Lady Merevine makes a show of rolling her eyes, “Oh, let someone lose a finger. Keeps things exciting.”

A steward chuckles. Another starts scribbling frantically— mare and stallion pairings, guest mount preferences. Branwen glimpses a few notes: one noblewoman refuses any horse that’s ever carried another rider. Another insists on a white mare with a *“feminine temperament.”* Whatever that means.

Branwen shifts the ledger toward herself and scrawls in the margin:

No Fangsnakes. The boy is probably going to be mulling around. He doesn’t need the fright. He probably has some superstitious belief with them.

She scratches it out. Too personal. Rewrites:

No Fangsnakes. Last time three dogs got bit and a servant boy cried.

That one stays.

She flips to the back of the ledger where the beast inventory lives. The page for Guttering Moths is blank— wrong season— but Rock-Hares, the Boneback, and even an out-of-date entry for Ghost Ibex are marked by previous Marshals. Branwen rolls her eyes.

“Anything else?” She asks, folding her arms, “Something simple. I’ve got fresh dogs that want blood and guests who don’t know the difference between a hunting horn and a chamber pot. Don’t give me exotic.”

The Lady's smile is like a cut being considered, "I want something pretty for the sketches. If not a hind, then... oh, what was that dreadful thing in the papers? The pale boar with the crooked spine."

"The Boneback," Branwen replies, "One escaped a butchery cage recently. Gutted two estate guards last winter," She pauses, "Still want it?"

The Lady waves a dismissive hand, "Maybe."

"Now that," Lady Merevine murmurs excitedly, "Sounds like something worth drawing."

Lady Alis snorts, "You just want to immortalise it before it tears someone's throat out."

Branwen suppresses a sigh so deep it hurts her ribs. She's a woman who knows shit, fur, rot, and teeth. That's her language. Not guest lists. Not herbal cordials and wax-sealed invitations and guest-mounts matched to birth signs. She doesn't plan. She *does* .

She closes the ledger, "We'll mark the south pasture. Two hinds spotted in rutting circles. If they're still there, I'll steer the dogs that way. If we run across a Boneback we'll have firearms."

The Lady rises, "Perfect. Make sure there's a pavilion for the sketches. And something warm for the guests."

She sweeps out, daughters and attendants trailing like ribbons behind her.

Branwen lingers, one hand resting on the closed ledger.

Hunting Marshal , they call her. But lately, it feels more like half-coordinator, half-babysitter. And the hinds? She isn't worried about them. It's the guests that trample.

And the daughters worst of all.

She wonders, briefly, what they do for sport in the colonies— those faraway outposts with their red dust roads and strange foliage. Do they ride? Hunt? Do they hold competitions with river serpents or paint duels on cliff faces? She doesn't know. Late at night, when the dogs are quiet and the wind off the mire is still, she lets herself imagine that she *does* . If she were in the colonies, would she be mistaken for someone important? Would she be the " *exotic"* one? Someone with clean boots and a coppery tan from some foreign sun. Someone who doesn't carry a shite-crusted ledger beneath her arm and bark at stablehands over poor animal handling.

She doesn't want to be a noble. Gods, no. But sometimes, especially after meetings like this, she wonders where she'd be if things had turned out differently. If she'd been born with soft hands and a taste for perfume. If she were the one in velvet, asking about sketch pavilions and snack baskets, not worrying over dogs with split pads or who might get gored. Not better, no. Just… elsewhere.

Somewhere cleaner. Somewhere far. Somewhere her boots didn't always stink of shite.

Days later, The Lady's daughters insist on *"scouting"* the grounds hours

before the hunting party, though Branwen suspects it's more about being seen than seeing anything useful. The two of them arrive done up in embroidered riding coats and feathered hats, the sort only nobles wear to claim familiarity with animals they don't actually understand.

The Tide Theorist one wears polished boots with heels too narrow for the fields and carries a spyglass she hasn't yet used. The botanist has a cluster of pressed flowers pinned to her collar— probably poisonous. She peers at the grass like she's appraising it for cultivation. She remarks breezily about *"the freshness of estate air"* and asks if there will be lemon cordial at the viewing sledge.

Branwen doesn't hide her scowl.

In the courtyard, the servants hustle in preparation. Maud oversees the picnic arrangements, her apron already smeared with jam from a collapsed tart. Her greying hair is pulled back into a no-nonsense bun, though a few wisps always escape near her temples, less from carelessness and more from sheer momentum. Linen cloths snap in the breeze, and boxes of wine are shuffled behind painted screens. The Lady's son is at the centre of it all, issuing instructions with careful authority, as if he actually owns the ground he stands on. Ordering servants is probably the most authority a nobleman can have, and certainly the most authority he will ever have ordering a *woman* around… Though certain rumours seem to imply otherwise. The nobility wouldn't be who they are without the constant gossip.

He's dressed in soft greens and ivory trim, his hair curled and pinned at the temples. A trade magistrate's husband, Branwen remembers. He speaks in the tone of a man used to being heard, though never in charge. His hands never leave his belt.

"No silver on the ground," he says, waving vaguely at Maud, "The tarnish from the grass last time made the cups smell like eggs. Also, the chairs must face the north hedgerow— the light's more flattering

for sketches.”

Maud murmurs assent without looking up, her hands already elbow-deep in basket placement. She orders something to another servant. Her voice carries like a bell over the chaos, not harsh but exacting. When she speaks, people move. Branwen's barely exchanged more than a few sentences with the Housekeeper-General— just enough to mention the chore fiasco and get a stern nod in return— but even that small moment was enough to know: Maud doesn't waste breath on niceties, and she doesn’t let anyone under her go slack. She’s the axis around which the estate’s domestic life spins.

There’s no shared camaraderie between kennel and kitchen, but there’s recognition: two women doing the unglamorous work that makes the rest of this absurd pageantry possible.

Nearby, other nobles arrive in a lazy stream, all velvet boots and lacquered lips. Their chatter rolls like a fogbank.

“Gorgeous creatures,” someone coos, gesturing vaguely toward the hound pens, “So obedient. So… primal.”

Branwen doesn’t know if the woman means the dogs or the servants. The gossip starts almost immediately, conspicuously away from The Lady’s children.

“I heard she brought one of them in again,” murmurs a young noblewoman behind a fan of peacock feathers.

“From the isles this time,” her companion whispers, delighted, “She does love them caramel-skinned and clever. Fetishist, that’s what I heard someone call her once. The Lady Fetishist.”

Branwen's head snaps around. One of the hounds lets out a low growl, sensing her tension. The women don't notice. Of course they don't.

Her scalp tightens with disgust. Not just at the words, but at the tone. The lazy way they say *"caramel."* Like describing perfume samples or cuts of meat. That smooth, curled-accent nobility gives to cruelty. Like everything is sugar-glazed— even the rot.

And gods, they *smell* . They smell like flowers pressed too tight into soap, like chalk scraped into skin. Branwen's lip curls. Noble soap. Always cold. Always cloying. How did they manage to make cleanliness feel unbearable?

She turns back to the kennels. The dogs are getting restless, whining, foam flecking their muzzles. They can sense it— the tension, the anticipation, the blood already in the air. Branwen moves down the line, checking harnesses and collars by feel. No one else dares touch them unless she says so.

And there, at the edge of the chaos beginning to unfold before the hunting party even starts, is Jonas.

He's bent over a tea set, carefully pouring into porcelain cups. He's not in his usual tunic, rather he's got something fancy for the occasion. An actual suit. His estate livery has been dusted and pressed, the silver-thread crest on his collar gleaming in the morning sun. He moves like glasswork. Precise, quiet and his eyes low. A few noblemen observe him idly, like one might admire a trained falcon.

Branwen watches him from the corner of her eye. She would imagine tea duty isn't a hard thing. It would be something more… relaxing, maybe. But his shoulders are tense, his posture tight with that too-

familiar awareness of being watched. Perhaps there is more to tea than she would have initially thought.

Some mounting begins, with some nobles wanting to “test” their horses. It’s a noisy, awkward ballet. Laughter erupts when one guest nearly brains her own footwoman trying to mount a skittish mare. Another complains loudly about the dust. Someone drops a parasol and shrieks.

Branwen mutters under her breath as she strokes the neck of her own mount.

“This is gonna be a shitshow.”

Rilke snorts in agreement.

Chapter End Notes

> Jonas, seeing a series of coincidences: omg the spirits they are protecting me. :D

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the day of the hunting party, Jonas wakes before the sun. Earlier than usual. The servant's quarters are still quiet, thick with the kind of hush that only comes just before dawn. His cot creaks softly as he shifts, blanket drawn up to his chin, but he doesn't close his eyes again. Can't.

His stomach's already knotted.

He hadn't expected tea duty. He figured he'd be scrubbing boot tracks from stone floors or refilling basins for the guest rooms like always. But someone had pulled his name yesterday, probably Maud, and now he's meant to wear white gloves and pour steaming lapsang. The thought makes his throat tighten. He swallows carefully. It's not that he minds serving, he's trained for that, but he hasn't done tea duty for a hunting party very much. At least during Hearthurn, all the nobles are focused on each other. But with a hunting party, however, with the women gone and the men picnicking… Attention can be easily brought upon him.

It's the eyes. The scrutiny. The way they all seem to look through him and directly at the flaws they expect to find.

And then there's Merrill.

The memory flares behind his ribs like a coal, ugly and bright. Jonas shifts upright, curling forward slightly, as if the posture alone might protect him from the echo of it.

“You’re probably warming the Hunting Marshal’s bed.”

“You’re just like the ones The Lady brings in from the capital.”

Jonas clenches his jaw. He’s still not sure what bothered him more: the accusation itself, or the way part of him had frozen— because a very small, very traitorous voice had whispered *maybe he’s right.* He may not actually be warming anyone’s bed, but what if he’s just a toy to her.

No… I need… I need to trust my envoy… I need to believe in the signs.

He presses his fingers hard against his temple. No more thinking like that. He reaches for the letter on the bedside crate.

The envelope smells faintly of smoke and pressed lavender, his brother’s idea of refinement. It’s sealed with a bit of embossed ribbon, the kind usually snipped from noble stationery. The cursive is all loops and flourishes, learned from second-hand etiquette pamphlets and copied with religious determination. Jonas can almost see Eliam’s tongue sticking out in concentration.

He unfolds the letter carefully. The paper is too thick for the message it carries. The perfume makes his nose twitch.

Weather’s been all wrong. The cook swears it’s the ghosts of drowned sailors twisting the wind. Storm’s coming along, though spring’s supposed to be here. And to think it’s already almost time for Hearthurn! The guests don’t mind the storm, however. They like being trapped indoors. More excuse to drink.

A potential storm doesn't bode well, but a storm from where his brother is would take a few days to arrive here. Or at least, he hopes so. Better yet, he hopes the storm will die out before reaching the estate at all.

Jonas reads on.

Had an interesting fellow come through the other night, said his cousin stutters and was cured by a tincture out west. Something brewed from bark and flower-spores. Foreign colonies, you know the type. And there's a paste you can rub under the tongue, too. The man claimed his cousin speaks like a stateswoman now. Thought you might want to try. Sent some coin.

Tucked in the crease of the letter is a neat ring of silver. Four pieces. Maybe five. He doesn't count them yet.

His breath catches.

Eliam means well. He always has. Jonas knows that, down to the marrow. He needs to believe that. But it still lands wrong— this needs to be fixed. It's not as though he disagrees. He wishes fervently he could speak normally, but it still stings for family to reaffirm it. They didn't make growing up easy but they cared, until they couldn't afford to…

He doesn't know if he's grateful or quietly furious.

The coin is still warm from the paper. Jonas turns it over in his palm, then tucks it back in the envelope and places it back by the bedside crate.

He still has time before the day really starts. He opts to read another edition of *The Genteel Standard,* this one he found discarded on a bench by the courtyard the other day. The paper's gold filigree masthead shimmers faintly with dew.

He was lucky to find this copy at all. Pages two through four had been muddied by someone's boot, but the central features were still legible. He brushes off stray dirt and begins to read, posture unconsciously straightening, as he'd been taught.

THE GENTEEL STANDARD
Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661
Issue No. 3,166 – Spring's Second Moon Edition

FEATURE: 'On the Constitution of Men' – An Excerpt from Lady Rhadessa of Clainforth's New Treatise on Male Biology

Recent studies supported by the Royal Society for Civilized Order affirm the long-accepted truth: men's nervous constitutions are inherently delicate. According to Lady Rhadessa, men are more prone to emotional disruption when exposed to direct leadership, complex decision-making, or extended periods without female supervision.

"As with songbirds, too much freedom leads to discordant behavior," she writes. "Men thrive in gentle containment."

The article recommends structured schedules, rhythmic domestic labour, and regular touch-based affirmation from wives, *"Disorder in the male temperament is almost always the fault of lax female guidance," says Lady Rhadessa.*

A sidebar suggests calming teas for husbands who appear restless or speak too frequently at meals, *Lavender-chamomile with valerian root has proven 74% effective in silencing impudent remarks.*

DOMESTIC LIFE:
In embroidery circles, Lady Tarmouth's third husband has stunned judges with his storm-grey threadwork, designed entirely from sketches of his wife's riding boots. The panel praised his "restraint and humble devotion."

EDUCATION & REFORM:
The Western Reform Institute has introduced a new social correctional uniform for boys exhibiting early signs of arrogance: a modest lilac smock with binding cuffs and a collar labelled "Eager to Learn." Results show a 43% increase in eye-lowering and apology formulation within a week.

ADVICE COLUMN: Ask Matron Lys
Q: My husband tried to initiate a discussion about household finances, what is the appropriate response?
A: Simply place a cushion on the floor, sit in your usual chair, and begin asking slow, rhetorical questions until he weeps. Then kiss his brow and remind him he's loved best when quiet.

Jonas stares at the page for a long moment after reading, his eyes skimming back over the black-inked curls of *'Men thrive in gentle containment.'* He knows it's meant to be patronising— knows the whole publication drips with a kind of condescension so thick you could bottle it like syrup— but still, some part of him lingers on the phrasing.

Flowery, yes. Silly in parts. Strict in others. But beneath the frills and forced poetry, it's full of rules that *weren't* written for boys like him… and still manage to reach for him all the same. That's the strange part, how much he recognises.

How much he understands.

Not everyone could. Some of the other houseboys he's met— especially the ones from Freehold villages or accompanying noble guests from estates not as grand as The Lady's— they barely read more than posted orders or biscuit labels. Jonas has overheard them mutter about how the *Standard* is *"for the soft-voiced ones"* or *"those who want to be kept."* Many couldn't recite a rule if their apron strings depended on it.

But he could. He realised some time ago how lucky he was to be born in a town where most families taught their sons to read and write. At least no one could take that from him— not even Merrill.

And that, whatever else the world had taken from him, he owed to his family.

Whatever else he feels about his family, and there are a great many feelings he has about his family, he *is* grateful. He thinks of the kitchen table back home. Rough, uneven planks that snagged your sleeves if you leaned too hard. His mother's voice, low and firm, rising just above the snap of the hearth as she guided his hand along the page of a primer. *"Slower,"* she'd say, tapping the wood beside his knuckles, *"Follow the curve. Make your tongue match the shape."* And Eliam, smothering a laugh whenever Jonas stumbled on a long word, only to press torn pages of storybooks into his hands once he'd tried again.

It hadn't been soft. Not often. Not warm, the way people like to imagine. But it had been some level of *effort.*

That ache is there again. The one that always shows up when he thinks too much about being packed off at twelve— like overproofed dough scraped into a too-small tin. Not *abandoned,* not exactly. That's

what he tells himself. Just… shelved. Reassigned. Sent off to what is surely a better fit.

He places the *Standard* on the crate he uses as a bedside table, then leans back against the thin pillow. His hand strays without thinking, sliding beneath the cloth and brushing the small, frayed scrap of red fabric tucked just inside the seam.

It’s soft from years of being touched but never washed. It's creased at the corners, dulled to a deep rust. It had once been part of something his mother wore when she was working in wealthy people’s gardens. It smells faintly of old dirt still.

His grandparents used to call red cloth a warding shade . Something that could keep spirits from twisting your dreams or following you between doorways. His grandfather used to spit twice and tie red twine around the doorframe before a long storm. His grandmother claimed red fabric, especially fabric worn by a mother, could keep a boy’s heart from going crooked in the night.

He keeps the scrap tucked close, right beneath where his head rests. Like it might shield him. Like it might make up for the things he never learned how to ask for.

He curls his fingers around the cloth once, then lets it go. There’s still time before the hunting party and tea duty. Not much, but enough to lie still and let his pulse settle.

And if the old stories are true, maybe the red thread will keep the worst of the day from finding him first.

He may not be going over a *Shadow Crossing* yet, but he still thinks of the rhyme as he lays there.

Salt to heel, smoke to brow, let no unseen follow now. Let not shadow walk with me.

Jonas has already trimmed the linen napkins and rearranged the biscuit tiers twice before the bell rings for tea setting. It's always like this during noble visits: everything must be perfect, even if no one looks twice at who laid it out. Servant customs for such occasions are ironclad, passed down through domestic handbooks and whispered habits.

Tea duty, despite its softness, is considered a senior responsibility for male staff. It requires grace, restraint, and memory. You don't pour until the noble makes eye contact. You don't let the pot drip. You fold your hands between service and never reach across a woman's path. Jonas once read a passage in *The Proper Son's Way* that said, *"Tea is a sacred hour. Your hands must be gentle, your breath quiet, and your soul subdued."*

So he subdues himself. Carefully.

From his place beneath the striped garden pavilion, Jonas glances toward the gathering of noblemen, delicate and perfumed men clad in pastel waistcoats and high-collared frocks cinched tight at the waist. One even has tiny gold roses embroidered at the throat, though the man's hands tremble each time he lifts his glass. Their voices rise and fall in lilting tones, mostly gossip.

He sees how each of them straightens slightly when their wives approach. One man, mid-sentence, falls abruptly silent when his lady glances his way, offering only a deferential nod as she passes. It's subtle but Jonas recognizes the shape of it. The bowed heads, the soft-

voiced affirmations, the delicate way their hands hover near wineglasses and teacups but never drink unless given permission. Submission, of a kind. Not unlike his own posture when addressing house superiors. Even wrapped in brocade and lace, the order of things holds fast.

The picnic setup itself looks like something from an etiquette painting: crystal glasses, cut silver, fruit piled like a harvest still-life, cushions stacked beside wicker chairs. Jonas watches them nibble at sugared citrus and candied nuts while occasionally calling out in support of their wives, who are still preparing for the hunt.

The women eventually move down far down the slope, surrounded by hounds and horses. Jonas spots Branwen in the distance, giving sharp instruction to someone who looks like they've never saddled anything more spirited than a hobby-horse. One of the noble daughters— a young one— tries to take control of a hound leash and immediately gets tangled in it. Branwen doesn't bother hiding her laugh.

A bell rings out from the stone veranda, the kind reserved for formal announcements. Servants and noblemen alike turn toward the source as The Lady emerges beneath a draped canopy, flanked by two attendants in ribboned sashes, one carrying a scroll. Her hunting cloak is black and ash-grey, trimmed in something pale and wild, possibly sablehind pelt. She raises a hand to quiet the murmurs.

Jonas, holding his linen-lined tray, bows his head slightly— but not too low, not too eager. That, too, is a trained instinct. One doesn't grovel unless asked.

"My esteemed guests," The Lady begins, her voice smooth and commanding, "You honour this house, and in return I offer you the hunt, though I pray you leave the land less bloodied than last year's enthusiasm."

A ripple of genteel laughter. Jonas glances at the noblemen. Most chuckle behind fingers or cups. Only a few of the women already mounted, or standing beside their assigned hounds, react. Branwen is stony and still.

"We hunt today not only for pleasure," The Lady continues, "but to reaffirm ties, between households, between distant territories, between past and future. With rumours from the eastern ports and tensions among our trading colonies, it is all the more vital that we remember: the Dominion holds because we hold. Our lands. Our promises. Our names."

She lifts a carved horn, bone-polished, capped in silver, and blows once, short and bright.

The rest of the riders mount. A flurry of silk and leather follows, along with barking hounds and the crack of whips. The Lady's two daughters lead the charge, flanked by ceremonial guards in forest-green. The Lady eventually leaves the veranda and joins them.

The hounds— sleek and silent, more predator than pet— bound ahead with unnatural precision. Their muscles ripple beneath thin, mottled coats; their eyes, gleaming and pale, seem to fix not on scent, but intention. It's almost as though these are not the same hounds from the kennels, but he knows that they somehow are. These are trained to chase what bleeds.

He watches their long limbs flash like blades across the grass, remembers the old tales his grandmother used to whisper: of shadow-dogs that hunted between worlds, with teeth that could tear through dreams. *The Black Maw,* she'd called them— fae hounds that left no footprints and howled only when someone was about to vanish.

Out of all the stories he heard in his childhood, *the Black Maw* was one

he actually didn't really believe in. But seeing these *creatures* move, he thinks of it now. He thinks of what it means to be bred for the kill, to love the chase more than the end.

No one else flinches. The nobles cheer. Jonas stays still. He presses the tray tighter to his chest and keeps his gaze low, so they won't see him watching, even up here on the slope. So he won't be mistaken for prey. He's going to be nervous entering kennels for a while now.

Branwen is the last to mount. She doesn't wave. She tugs down her hat and spurs her horse into motion, trailing just behind the noble daughters like a dark shadow among summer-painted riders.

As the hunt crests the ridge and disappears, Jonas feels the atmosphere shift. This is its own ritual.

Now the men settle in to Feasting Remaintenance— an old domestic tradition adapted for noble picnicking. It's expected that the husbands of the huntresses maintain a waiting feast, replenish dishes, praise their wives in absentia, and discuss matters of estate or education. No one says *we're letting the women do the dangerous work,* but everyone knows.

He's rarely seen it himself— usually dismissed before the return— but he's heard what comes after. Once the hunt concludes and the ladies rejoin the gathering, the arrangement shifts. The women sit on high-backed, gilded chairs brought just for them, while their husbands kneel on embroidered cushions at their feet. A gesture of esteem. Jonas has overheard the gossip: praise for a husband's grace in kneeling, the poise with which he daintily offers a grape to her lips.

But that, Jonas can't quite relate. Servants don't kneel in adoration, but in apology. They bow in silence, out of necessity. They don't sit in noble presence at all. Their bodies exist around noble comfort, not

within it. There's no ceremony to it. Just the weight of being always unseen, always standing.

He stands still with the tray at his chest, watching the men delicately choose their biscuits. One selects a shortbread and inspects it like it might hold a secret. Another loudly debates whether honey or clotted cream pairs better with herbal tea. No one looks at Jonas except to murmur a thank you, and even then, it's more reflex than recognition.

But one guest, an older man in a robin's-egg blue coat, meets his gaze directly and says, "Your hands are very steady. You were trained in a circle, weren't you?"

Jonas flushes. He'd hoped to get through the afternoon without speaking at all.

"Y-y-ye—yes," He manages.

The man smiles faintly and turns back to his biscuit. Jonas takes that as permission to exhale.

He moves among them like mist, distributing chilled fruit and collecting used serviettes. The linens must stay smooth. The fruit must stay cold. His steps are measured, posture loose, and invisible unless summoned.

Before anyone else, he approaches a man in a soft green vest and a delicately pleated necktie: Lord Arleth, The Lady's only son.

They're close in age, but their lives could not be further apart. Lord Arleth has always been distant. Something of a dreamer, Jonas

supposes, always sketching alongside his sister or asking the head cook for nutmeg. He left years ago upon his marriage. Every visit of his sparks a flurry of unseen servant rituals.

His teacup must be rinsed three times before use.

His biscuits arranged in crescents, never circles.

And when he arrives, it is not a footwoman who takes his coat— he removes it himself, then hands it to his wife. Without announcement and without correction. Everyone knows better than to ask. Jonas tries not to think about how it strangely unsettles him.

No one says these things aloud. Jonas just knows. He doesn't speak. He simply stops beside him and bends slightly, angling the tray just so.

Lord Arleth glances up from his sketchbook, he's been drawing someone's boots again, and arches a fair brow.

"Oh," He blinks lazily, eyes flicking over the offerings, "Is that… peach?"

Jonas gives a small nod, gaze lowered. With The Lady's son, at least, he knows he doesn't need to necessarily vocalize an answer. Lord Arleth had told him it was better to simply not talk years ago, and Jonas staunchly follows that command to this day.

"Mm. Lovely," Lord Arleth plucks a slice and nibbles at the edge like a cat testing a new dish, "You're the one with the stammer, aren't you?"

Jonas's spine tenses. He dips his head lower, neither confirmation nor denial.

"Right. I remember that I assumed you were mute for some time until you finally said something," Lord Arleth continues, voice light. It's not cruel, it's worse: indifferent, "It's very monkish. Has a kind of aesthetic appeal, I suppose."

Jonas swallows hard. The tray remains perfectly still. He does not speak.

After a beat, Lord Arleth waves his peach slice idly, "No need to look stricken. It's not a criticism. I find talking exhausting sometimes. That said, thank you."

He flicks his wrist in dismissal and returns to his drawing. Jonas straightens and steps away, the tray level in his hands. But his ears burn.

Mute. Monkish. Aesthetic.

He still hears Branwen's voice in his mind— " *You've got good brushwork. Next time the horse smells like death, I'll fetch you."*

He wishes she were here now. At least she hasn't made him feel like something folded up wrong… Not yet, anyway. Jonas hopes it stays as a *not yet.*

Out in the brush, Branwen rides at the rear.

The hounds had been loosed. Thirty lean bodies bounding through brush and scrub, weaving beneath the tall-stalked sun-pines like darts through needlework. She whistled once, sharp and low and her command pack veered left on instinct, flanking wide.

She sits up slightly in the stirrups to get a clearer view. Dust spirals ahead, trailed by embroidered hems and ridiculously flared riding coats. The noblewomen shout to one another, laughter bubbling over the thunder of hooves. Their voices are too high, too bright. As if they've forgotten there are knives strapped to these beasts' mouths.

Their habits, high-collared and silk-trimmed nonsense, are already catching burrs and snagging bramble. One of them rides the stiff back of someone who believes she can ride because she once watched a play about it. Her heels flap at odd angles. The horse tolerates it, but barely.

Another, younger and overeager, has a fine rifle slung across her back, though she holds it like a lute. Branwen's gut twists at the sight. That's The Lady's younger daughter, isn't it? The botanist, more at ease with plants instead of hunts. All noblewomen are taught to ride and hunt in their youth, but her lessons clearly haven't stuck over the years.

She'll spook at the first squeal of blood, Branwen thinks. And if she misfires—

A sharp whistle to her right draws her attention: the elder daughter, Lady Alis. She rides like someone born to it— calm, weight centred, reins loose but alert. There's no fear in her grip, only calculation. When she adjusts the strap of her weapon, it's not with hesitation but

the ease of practise. That one won't panic. That one's probably taken down worse.

Branwen adjusts her reins and veers slightly, keeping a sidelong eye on Lady Merevine's jerky grip. The reins keep snapping too tight, then too slack. That's how you get someone thrown. A tumble here means a collarbone shattered or worse, startling the hounds into chaos.

This may be a game to nobles, but it's not to Branwen.

The wind shifts. It's subtle, a sideways drag of air thick with musk and churned rot. Branwen feels it before she smells it, a warning along her spine, that feral current that travels faster than thought. Ahead, the hounds reel mid-stride. One lifts its muzzle and lets out a jagged, ragged bay.

Then they break.

No more weaving or bounding for show. Now it's all drive. Their bodies hunch low, jaws snapping reflexively as they course forward in a new vector. No longer fanning but narrowing. They're converging.

She sees it in the dirt. Hoof-churned, deep impressions and bristle-snagged branches. A low trail through the underbrush like a tunnel torn by rage and hunger.

"Boneback," Branwen mutters under her breath, "Here we go."

Not as rare as a sable-hind. Not as dangerous as a mirewolf. But enough to bloody a few hounds and send a noblewoman tumbling if they're not quick. If they're not smart, and this group hasn't exactly

instilled a lot of confidence.

The dogs cry out as one— chorused, frenzied, full of that high keen of a sure quarry found— and bolt downslope, the brush scattering before them. Branwen urges her mare forward, boots pressed hard to its flanks. She keeps one hand on her horn and the other near her blade.

The Boneback explodes from the thickets.

It's bigger than she expects. Bristle-thick hide ridged like plated bark, a snout split wide with froth and foam. Its tusks curve like twin scythe blades, yellowed and wet with spittle. Blood darkens its shoulder where some beast must've taken a bite weeks ago, half-healed and cracked open anew.

The lead hounds close first, darting in and out like thrown knives. One lunges for the boar's haunch with its teeth bared and foam flecking its muzzle. It nearly gets its throat torn when the Boneback bucks sideways.

It charges through a tangle of scrub. Three dogs try to flank it.

The fourth isn't so lucky.

A tusk flashes, and slams upward. There's a sound like canvas tearing. The hound is lifted clean off the ground and tossed, body crumpling midair before it thuds hard against a tree trunk. Branwen hears the scream. It's worse than a human scream.

One of the noblewomen ahead her yelps, reins tangling in panic.

Branwen's pulse is a hammer. Part of her job involves putting down animals that no longer have a use. That hound, if its injuries are as grievous as she assumes, will likely have a bullet in its head before the day is over. Her mare dances beneath her. She pushes forward, toward the snarling knot of dogs and bone and bramble. The Boneback isn't slowing, it's fast for something that size, carving a crooked path downhill with terrifying momentum.

The Boneback crashes through the last of the underbrush, sides heaving, flanks streaked with foam and blood. It falters as it enters the clearing, hooves slipping in soft loam, and that's all the hounds need. They descend like a living storm— snapping, baying and circling tight.

One grips its hind leg, another clamps onto the shoulder, dragging against the weight of it. The boar bucks and spins, flinging another dog clean off with a terrible sound, but more pour in, a wave of tooth and instinct. Branwen stays just outside the ring, her knuckles white. Her mare stamps and tosses its head, restless from the noise.

Around the edges of the chaos, the noblewomen gather, some reining in sharply, others trotting too close for comfort. One of them is laughing, loud and high, as though it's still a parlour game.

Lady Merevine veers too close.

The younger daughter's cheeks are flushed from the ride, sweat darkening the front of her velvet collar. Her rifle is clutched awkwardly in both hands, the muzzle swaying too close to a nearby horse's flank. She draws a bead on the Boneback, breath shallow, eyes wild with excitement or panic— it's hard to tell.

"Merevine, no!" Lady Alis hisses, drawing her own horse sharply

alongside. Her voice is all flint and ice, “You’ll hit a hound, or worse.”

“You’re not my handler,” Lady Merevine snaps, trying to steady the barrel.

“I’m your sister. Give me the godsdamn gun before you shoot someone.”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m one of your students.”

“At least my students know where the trigger is!”

Branwen starts forward, jaw tight. She’s about to bark something, anything, to end the spat before it turns lethal. But then a new voice cuts through the thundering hounds, the hissed arguments, the chaos of blood and bristle.

“Move.”

The word isn’t loud, but it carries like thunder. The daughters obey immediately.

The Lady rides forward, her stallion as calm and sure-footed as if stepping onto polished stone. She raises a slender pistol, ivory-handled and brass-lined, and takes aim. Branwen immediately gives a low whistle to make the hounds back away slowly. There’s no haste, no drama. The Lady waits, breathing once. Twice. Then squeezes the trigger.

The shot cracks the air like a slap.

The Boneback stumbles, roars— then drops, a hole blown clean through its eye. The hounds scatter further, their job done, circling with nervous energy as the body shudders once, then goes still.

Silence crashes in.

A few of the noblewomen cheer faintly. One dabs at her mouth with a scented kerchief, another claps gloved hands. The tension breaks with a kind of breathless, polite approval, as if someone just played a perfect sonata rather than dispatched a beast with a bullet to the skull.

"...Well struck," Branwen says plainly. Her fingers twitch at the adrenaline that refuses to fade.

The Lady smiles vaguely, "It would appear my daughters are out of practice."

Lady Alis clicks her tongue and turns her horse away. Lady Merevine lowers her gun slowly, red-faced and trembling. Branwen doesn't reply. She watches the body steam in the morning light, flanked by panting dogs and the stink of torn earth. Servants will eventually come and retrieve the kill.

"Well. Onwards then," The Lady says calmly.

And so the hunt continues. There is more prey to shoot.

The hunting party returns by late afternoon, flushed and triumphant. The hoofbeats come first, echoing down the servant's path toward the east paddock. Jonas stands with the tray of folded linen napkins at his chest, still and watchful as the riders come into view. His breath catches— he sees Branwen.

She rides near the edge of the group, her posture straight, jaw set. Mud splashes up the hem of her coat, and something dark streaks across her cheek like an old bruise. She doesn't look at him. But that's all right. He's not supposed to be looked at.

The Lady rides in the centre, her riding coat streaked with bramble scratches and faint spatters of blood, most of which do not appear to be hers. Her expression is composed, faintly smiling. Not from exertion, but satisfaction.

Behind them, servants drag out various kills: a vixen and her kits, three common deer, and a boar. One of the hounds limps. Another growls if anyone gets too close to the carcasses.

Gentle applause rises from the noblemen seated at the shaded picnic. They've not moved much all afternoon, their embroidered coats remain crisp, their sunhats unruffled and their breeches uncreased. Half-drunk bottles of chilled cordial gleam on silver trays, sweating under the sun. Someone passes around a sketchbook. One of the servants had been ordered to pose the spare hounds for Lady Marquessa's 'dog studies,' and now her drawings are being reviewed with languid amusement.

"She's caught the eyes all wrong," one man murmurs as Jonas passes, "Dogs don't think like that. They don't… remember."

Jonas doesn't pause. He moves around the group, quiet as a wisp, setting down fresh napkins beside the fruit dishes. With that, he thinks the worst of the day is over. Soon enough, he'll be dismissed, once the women return to their husbands and the fawning begins.

But as he crosses behind the third table, a hand snatches his sleeve.

Merrill.

The boy isn't smiling, not exactly, but there's a glint in his eye that makes Jonas' stomach drop. He leans in, voice low and slippery with purpose.

"Lord Thedden asked for wine. The one with the purple sash. Go on, then."

Jonas blinks, "I—"

"He said now. You wouldn't want to keep a guest waiting, would you?"

It's a trap. Jonas knows it before he even reaches for the decanter. But what choice does he have? Refuse, and risk a scene in front of the nobility? There are rules for this sort of thing— strict, unwritten customs dictating how servants of his standing are to interact with guests. Merrill, clever and cruel, skirts those rules by proxy.

And Jonas, as ever, is too afraid to push back.

He approaches the table, keeping his eyes down.

The nobleman looks up. Round-faced, powdered, with a sweeping feather pinned to his broad-brimmed hat. His cheeks are flushed, either from drink or the sun. He blinks at Jonas. Then at the wine. Then back at him again.

“What’s this?”

Jonas knew this was going to happen. He has to *speak* now. His hands begin to feel clammy, but he keeps the tray steady through significant effort. His stomach twists in knots, hoping against hope that his mother’s red thread might actually help him in some way, despite how ridiculous such a thought seems now.

“W-w-wine, si—-sir,” Jonas manages, voice barely above a whisper.

Lord Thedden lifts a brow, “Wine, he says. With all the delicacy of a bleating ewe.”

A couple of the nearby men chuckle. Jonas feels the heat rise behind his ears.

Lord Thedden turns slightly in his seat, clearly enjoying himself now, “Are you meant to be a servant or part of the entertainment?”

“I—I’m j-j-just—”

“Don’t choke on it, boy, it’s only a question.”

More laughter. The weight of their attention bears down hard, as if he's been yanked out of his place and forced into the middle of a stage, naked and stammering beneath the gaslight. His chest is tight. His face burns. Shame pricks at the corners of his eyes, sharp and hot, but he wills it down with everything he has.

He wants to vanish. To curl in on himself like a scorched leaf and disappear between the cracks in the flagstone. He doesn't meet their eyes. He stares just to the left of Lord Thedden's elbow, where a glint of sunlight flashes off the rim of a cordial glass. Something steady. Something safe.

One of the other noblemen leans in, stage-whispering just loud enough for Jonas to hear, "They send the tongue-tied ones out when they run out of trained dogs."

Lord Thedden smiles, "Is this how you all serve wine here? Like you're apologizing for it?"

Jonas swallows. He doesn't answer. He can't. The inside of his mouth feels dry and useless, his tongue suddenly too big, too heavy. He's just short of trembling.

His eyes dart, beyond the flickering glass and cruel smirks, then Jonas catches a movement. Just past the third table. Merrill— He's leaning casually against a stack of saddle-towels, arms folded. He doesn't even bother to hide his grin.

It almost breaks Jonas.

His throat clenches so tight he can barely breathe. He grips the

decanter to keep his hands from shaking and presses his tongue to the roof of his mouth to keep anything else from spilling out— any word or sound. All he wants is to flee, to bolt back toward the linen tent and hide beneath the racks of drying napkins until dusk.

But then—

A voice, rough and cutting, knifes through the laughter like a thrown axe.

“Say another word,” Branwen growls as she treks up the slope and reaches them, “And I’ll let the hounds piss on your boots.”

Silence ripples across the clearing. It hits the noblemen first who are stunned and slack-jawed. Even the breeze seems to still.

Lord Thedden turns, blinking against the sunlight, “Who— what is this?” He sputters, “You let the stablehands speak to guests?”

Branwen doesn’t flinch. Her boots crunch dry grass as she strides forward, still in her hunting leathers, blood streaked across one sleeve. “Hunting Marshal,” she says flatly, “Of this estate.”

Another stunned beat.

She keeps walking, eyes hard as flint, mouth drawn tight, “I just put down two perfectly good hounds. Three more didn’t make it back from the hunt. One of your wives nearly lost her face because someone couldn’t tell a safety from a trigger,” Her eyes snap to Lord Thedden, “So if you think I’ve got patience left for limp-lunged fops mocking a servant in broad daylight, try me.”

Gasps flutter through the group like birds startled from hedges.

A third nobleman, red-cheeked and clearly drunk, mutters, “No wonder your manners are foul— you reek of goatshit and middle-class birth. Is this the kind of gutter breed The Lady hires now?”

Branwen stares him down, not blinking, “Better middle-class than spineless. At least we wipe our own arses.”

One of the men falters, “You can’t—”

“I can,” she says, “And I did.”

“You’ll be reported for this.”

“Please,” she deadpans, “Tell your wives. I’d love to hear what they think about how you treated a boy doing his work. Or maybe they’ll ask what *I* was doing at the brothel when I last saw them.”

That silences them.

Jonas stands frozen, wide-eyed. He isn’t even sure he’s breathing. His chest is so tight he thinks it might shatter, and yet, beneath the deep embarrassment and the lingering sting of mockery, something else unfurls.

Awe.

Not the fragile sort, but a trembling, heart-fluttering, breath-caught kind of reverence. It knocks the wind from him.

Branwen. *Again.*

She just keeps astonishing him— bolder than he could ever hope to be, full of blunt words and impossible timing. A woman who doesn't bow to nobles, who growls like thunder and means it.

She *must* be a forest envoy. That's the only explanation. Some guardian sent from the moss-choked thickets to watch over him. A spirit wearing human skin and boot-leather, with eyes like flint and hands that smelled of horsehair and woodsmoke. Sent to shield him.

It makes him feel impossibly warm.

The noblemen slink off one by one, muttering, bruised egos hidden behind lace cuffs and crumpled sunhats. Merrill disappears, too—no longer grinning, just gone. Branwen stays where she is, still as a stone, watching until the last man turns his back.

Then she looks at Jonas.

He wants to vanish. Melt into the tray in his hands and disappear beneath the linen folds.

"You alright?" She asks. Her voice is lower now, not soft, but stripped of the bite.

He nods, small and sharp, like any more movement might tip him over.

“Good,” she says, “Now go before they make you clean their boots out of spite.”

He hesitates, not from fear, but because he sees it now. The steadiness in her face. The lack of judgement. She isn’t angry at him. Maybe she never was. He turns, fast and quiet, tray and decanter clutched to his chest like a lifeline, ears ringing.

Behind him, murmurs ripple through the servants.

One of them whispers, “Never seen the Marshal talk like that for anyone.”

An evening later, Branwen is called to The Lady’s office. Thankfully, her children are absent.

The office smells of old paper and vanished flowers— powdery, brittle, perfumed into something not quite sweet. Cedarwood smoke curls from the hearth in slow spirals, casting warmth without comfort. Ledgers with matching covers line the shelves, each spine labelled in an immaculate, looping hand. The writing desk gleams faintly with oil and use, a silver letter opener poised like a knife beside a stack of parchment. A ceramic bowl of dried lavender sits forgotten in the corner, more symbolic than fragrant now.

Mounted above the hearth is the head of some foreign beast, its features unfamiliar and wrong in the way things from far-off lands often are. Its eyes are glassy amber, its snout wide and short, like a hunter's dog grown too large. Coarse fur, ruddy and streaked with deep umber, frames its face in thick, corded strands. Branwen has never seen its like in the eastern provinces. It belongs to no forest she's walked, no cliffside she's climbed.

She has never gotten close enough to read the small plaque beneath it, and she's never asked. Once, when she lingered too long staring, the Lady had said without looking up from her papers:

"The South Dominion. Fourth Colonial Hunt."

As if that alone explains the thing's presence, its death, and the cold, glass-eyed way it watches the room. No story. No name. Just a reference, something filed and mounted.

Branwen has never stepped foot beyond three provinces. Some mornings, the world feels no bigger than the stables and the path to the orchard. And other days, like this, it feels vast and brutal, full of impossible beasts from impossible distances, each one mounted high above her head, watching.

She stands at ease, arms folded behind her back, boots still damp and crusted with the grit of horsepath and field. Across the desk, The Lady reclines with a small glass of cordial, reading spectacles perched low on her nose. She looks up only after Branwen has stood in silence for some time.

"Well," she says, voice smooth as silk laced with something sharper, "Apparently I'm meant to be furious with you."

Branwen doesn't answer.

The Lady's lips twitch, "Lord Thedden's wife sent a letter by the evening runner. Positively dripping with injury. She wants you sacked. You and the stammering one. Imagine."

Branwen shifts, "Is that so."

"She says the comment about the brothel was deeply uncivilized. And her husband is beside himself," The Lady leans back, drink in hand, clearly not beside herself in the least, "Frankly, I think you could've gone further. I can't stand Lord Thedden."

Branwen's brow furrows, "So… am I—?"

"Fired? Gods, no." The Lady waves a hand, as if batting away a gnat, "You're far too good at your job, and frankly, I don't care if half the gentry spit feathers. Despite what I say at dinners or before hunts, and I do find those little speeches irritating, I'm not friends with most of those people. And their family doesn't even own decent land. Just a dwindling title and two sour daughters. Let them pout."

Branwen keeps her posture neutral, but the tension in her jaw eases.

The Lady glances toward the window, where dusk blurs the outlines of the estate. "Besides," she adds casually, "My son thought what you said was *very* funny."

Branwen blinks, she didn't realise he was in earshot, "Did he."

“He was choking on a peach, apparently.”

A beat of silence passes.

Branwen shifts again, uneasy. She never knows how to hold praise, especially not from this woman— *especially* not when it arrives sideways, dressed in humour and hedged in irony. She’s known The Lady long enough to read the signs. And still, the woman remains a polished mirror: every reflection slightly askew.

The Lady takes another sip. “And for what it’s worth…” She lowers her glass and meets Branwen’s gaze head-on, “I do appreciate how you don’t gossip about my bedmates.”

Branwen’s mouth parts slightly, caught off guard.

“I know they talk,” the Lady continues, smiling that unreadable smile, “Even the ones who pretend not to. But you never have.”

Branwen scratches her jaw, “...Not really my business.”

“No,” The Lady agrees, “It’s not. Which is why I like you.”

Branwen clears her throat, “Right. Well. If that’s all—”

She turns halfway to the door, then hesitates, “…And the boy?”

The Lady shrugs, “He’ll keep his job.”

No more. No less. As if that alone is sufficient.

Branwen nods, slow, “Right.”

Then she leaves, boots echoing against the polished wood as the door clicks shut behind her.

The stables and kennels are quiet that evening.

The torches have long since been lit, casting slow, swaying gold across the beams and floorboards. It’s warm in here, rich with the scent of hay and horsehide, but Jonas is cold. His hands won’t stay still. He stands just inside the entryway, twisting his fingers, breath shallow and fast. His chest feels hollow, like something important has been scooped out and left behind somewhere he can’t return to.

He’s been spiralling since morning. Ever since the first whisper.

They’d started in the laundry room, casual and poisonous. Then he heard them again near the kitchen, passed like a fever between the kitchen boys and the younger footwomen. Always in that same low, pitying tone.

“They want him gone, that tongue-tied boy.”

“The Lady’s guests were shocked, I heard. Lord Thedden’s wife had a letter sent straight off.”

“And the Marshal, too. But the Lady’ll keep her. The boy, though? He’s as good as gone.”

He hadn’t eaten. Hadn’t spoken. He washed dishes with shaking hands. Someone dropped a tray and the clang barely registered. Everything has felt muffled, like he’s underwater and everyone else is breathing air just fine.

Now, he’s here. The only place that felt steady.

Branwen is brushing down one of the older mares. Her broad hand moves in sure, even strokes across the dusty flank, and Jonas watches her like she’s the only fixed point in a spinning world. Her shirt sleeves are rolled up. There’s straw caught in her braid. Her whole body seems to hum with purpose. He thinks, fiercely and irrationally, that if she looks at him just once like she did yesterday, like she doesn’t regret stepping in, then maybe he won’t fall apart.

She notices him and stills. Her brows crease, “What—?”

“I—I—I’m s—s—sor—” Jonas blurts. The word tears itself loose, raw and cracking, “I—I—it w–was m–m—my f–fault, I—”

Jonas’s breathing goes sharp and ragged. He shakes his head, still looking anywhere but at her.

“I d–didn’t m–mean t–to m–make a s–scene,” he stammers, “I—I d-didn’t—I—I sh–should’ve just b–b–b–bowed and—”

His voice breaks on the word. His hands press to his face.

“I—I h–heard—th–they’re s–sending letters—th–they’re— If I g–get fire— I d–d-don’t—I don’t kn–know where to—”

“Jonas.”

Her voice cuts through him like a blade through rope, clean and final. The command in her tone causes him to stumble to silence, chest heaving.

She says it again, quieter this time but still iron-heavy, “Jonas. Look at me.”

It takes everything in him to obey. His gaze drags upward, watery and ashamed, and he finds her watching him without a flicker of softness. It’s not— *cruel,* not like when he’s receiving a reprimand. But it is unyielding. Like the post a horse is tied to, steady whether he likes it or not.

“You’re not getting sacked,” she says. No hesitation and no mercy in the way she says it, “You hear me?”

His breath hitches. He stares, wide-eyed.

“I already spoke with The Lady,” she goes on, “You’ll keep your job. So quit winding yourself up.”

His lips part. A strangled sound escapes him— half a breath, half a question— but no words form.

“She thinks Lord Thedden’s a tit,” Branwen adds flatly. “And his wife worse. You should’ve seen the way she rolled her eyes. Said they don’t even own decent land.” A short, sharp snort follows, “They’ll sulk a bit, send more ink and paper, and then move on to harassing someone else. That’s all those types ever do.”

His panic eases a fraction. Not gone, but no longer trying to claw him apart from the inside. He blinks hard, once, twice.

“Re—” His voice warbles, “Re–r-really…?”

“Really,” She answers, her voice clipped and with no room for argument.

Relief makes his knees feel watery. He drags a hand across his eyes, embarrassed at the wetness he finds there. Heat burns in his cheeks, “I —I th–thought…”

“I know,” Branwen says simply. He studies her face. Nothing to give away what she’s thinking. Somehow that steadiness holds him up more than pity would.

He continues looking at her for a long moment. His chest still aches, his body still buzzes like it’s not his own— but through the smoke and dread, something warm takes hold, heavy and grounding. He wants to fall into it. Or fold it into his palms and keep it close forever.

She called him by name. She said his name *to* him.

He'll replay that later. Over and over.

"Th-than—thank y—you," He murmurs.

Branwen shrugs, but there's a flicker in her eyes, "I don't like bullies."

A beat.

And then, gruffly and awkwardly, "But, uh, don't think I'll make a habit of hauling you out of every scrape. You get yourself knocked about again, you're on your own."

The words knock him off balance, not sharp but lopsided in a way that nearly makes him smile. A startled laugh bursts from his throat before he can stop it, thin and muffled behind his hand. His chest feels less tight. Lighter, even.

"Y—Ye-yes," He manages, voice still uneven but steadier now, "J–just… th–thank y—you. F–for th-this one."

Branwen clears her throat and gives a noncommittal grunt, turning back to the mare. Her hand moves in firm strokes over its flank, but she doesn't tell him to leave.

His heart's thudding, too fast, too loud, and there's something else rising now, something tangled and overwhelming. He should stop. He has thanked her, so he should leave. And yet, he feels— floaty. Riding a range of emotions of hearing her say his name and her standing between him and nobles like a wall that can't be knocked down.

But instead, words tumble out. His voice is raw and he says far too much.

“I–I–I l-like— I l–li–like… w–w–working w–w–with—w–”

He hears himself. Hears the crack in his voice, the too-eager stammering, the heat crawling up his neck. He chokes, eyes going wide. No. No, that’s not— he’s overstepping. Acting like he wants something. Like a *man* wanting something.

Branwen pauses, her hand still resting flat against the mare’s flank. She doesn’t speak right away. Her brow furrows just slightly, mouth parting like she’s searching for words and not quite finding them. To Jonas, it’s damning.

The crease in her forehead *must* mean frustration. The tilt of her head — a *warning* . Her silence— proof that he’s made a mistake. His gut twists. She’s annoyed. He’s definitely overstepped. Of course he has. After all that, he should have quietly left.

“I–I’m—I’m s–s-sorry. S-sor–sorry—” He blurts out next, stepping back, eyes darting for the stable door, “I–I d–didn’t m–m–mean—”

He turns, mortified, ready to flee.

“Oi,” Branwen says, her voice firmer this time, but not sharp. It’s something more level, “Don’t bolt. You’ll spook the mare.”

Jonas freezes. Slowly, he looks back at her. His chest rises and falls in short, shallow bursts.

She squints at him, brushing down the mare's side like it's nothing urgent, just another task to finish, "Stutter's not something to be sorry for. You talk how you talk. End of it."

It takes Jonas a moment to register it, long enough for his heart to hammer against his ribs like a warning bell, long enough for the shame to rise like floodwater up his throat. But then something strange happens: Branwen doesn't turn away. She doesn't frown, doesn't cross her arms or bark something short and dismissive. She just… blinks at him.

Just… trying to understand why a trembling boy is apologizing like she's scolded him, when she hasn't raised her voice once.

He feels a fresh wave of embarrassment. *Oh.* He might have overreacted.

That furrow in her brow isn't scorn. It's thought. Her silence isn't condemnation, but consideration. Her eyes, rough and sharp as they are, don't narrow with irritation. She's just surprised. She doesn't even know what he actually tried apologizing for, believing it has to do with his stammer. Them both misunderstanding is almost enough for Jonas to let out another disbelieving laugh.

It takes him a long second to find his breath. He should… probably finish what he wanted to say. He owes her that much. When he does, it's soft and trembling. He doesn't dare look at her. He stares at the floorboards instead, face burning.

"I… I l-like w–w–working w–with you," He finally gets out, voice frayed.

Branwen makes a small sound— like she just doesn't know what to do with that. Jonas frankly doesn't know either.

Branwen makes a small noise, a gruff, caught between surprise and dismissal. Then she exhales through her nose, "Hnh. Well… you're not hopeless. Good with your hands. If you're not busy, how about you grab a brush and see to the bays."

Jonas dares to glance at her, and her gaze doesn't waver.

His heart is still racing, but it's no longer clawing him apart.

Not for tonight, at least.

A day later, Jonas finishes his chores early so that by the time the sun begins to slip beneath the orchard ridge, he can ease out quietly, coat buttoned and boots quick on the gravel.

He folds the letter for the third time in the dim hush of the servants' corridor, the soft click of the wax seal against his thumb grounding him like a pulse. The coin his brother sent rests in his pocket like a secret promise. *For the tinctures,* the letter had said, written in Eliam's familiar loopy hand, carefully casual, with just a thread of older-brother condescension wound through the script.

But tinctures are the last thing on his mind.

Instead, his thoughts burn with something far more urgent and,

perhaps, absurd— shortbread and Branwen and that look she'd given him in the stables, like he was worth protecting. How she has stood between him and ridicule twice now, like it costs her nothing. Like he actually matters. She'd called him by his name. *Jonas.*

The world's been tilted sideways since.

He can't repay her for that, not really. But he can bake. He'd always been good with pastry, knew how to measure by touch, how to coax butter into flour. And she deserved something good. So he'd make her something. Not shortbread— he wouldn't try to mimic the spiritual envoy, it felt too bold, too... presumptuous. But something close. Spiced honey-cakes, maybe. She seems like the sort who might like spice.

So with the coin pocketed, his chores done, and his resolve cinched tight like a belt, Jonas steps out toward town.

Storm clouds gather low in the distance, layered dark and slow above the western hills. They haven't broken yet, but he can smell the promise of them— wet stone and woodsmoke, wind in the eaves. He knows he'll need to be quick. If he walks briskly, keeps his head down and doesn't linger, he should be back at the estate before the weather turns.

Jonas does not leave the bounds of the estate often, but when he does, the first thing he notices is usually the cobblestone. It's set in neat, patterned lines that glisten faintly with recent mist. The town is well-appointed, no doubt about it. Not a city, not quite sprawling, but still grand enough to remind him of his place.

The buildings rise with stately pride along the main thoroughfare: tall and trim, with polished windows and painted shutters, each façade carefully curated to look older than it is. The upper storeys jut slightly

over the streets, casting early twilight shadows that make the gas lamps flicker like fireflies. Ornamental ironwork lattices the balconies, and brass plaques mark every tea parlour, bookshop, and tailor with tasteful precision. Their doors are painted in deep jewel tones— wine red, forest green, navy— and the windows are filled with curated displays meant to suggest ease, refinement, and quiet wealth.

Jonas keeps his head down as he walks, coat tight around him. Just because he works for The Lady doesn't mean he belongs in these shopfronts. Only higher ranked servants like Maud can go to shops here without being asked if they're lost. Someone like him— he'd probably be kicked out if he lingers too long. Still, he keeps to the walkways, trying not to look too rushed or too rural. His boots leave faint marks on the clean stone, and he catches more than one sideways glance from a well-dressed matron or a shopboy sweeping his stoop.

Further up the hill, the tone changes again, townhouses with gas lamps on private gates, hedges trimmed into deliberate shapes, and carriages parked just so. It's the noble quarter, unmistakably. The stone turns lighter here, more polished, the windows bigger, the ironwork filigreed instead of sturdy. Jonas doesn't linger here, either. He moves quicker. He takes a narrow cut between buildings, where the plaster peels and the air smells like yeast and steam, and emerges onto a street with plainer signs and narrower doors.

Here, among the bakers and candle-makers, he feels a little more like he can breathe. Still too nice for the likes of him, but not so polished that every step feels like trespassing.

And luckily for him, he's able to get what he needs without having to speak. And he even still has extra coin to spare.

At the grocer's, he nods once, placing the honey and spices carefully on the counter. The shopkeeper gives a grunt of recognition, rings up the price without comment. Jonas passes over the coin with steady

hands, grateful for the silence, for the unspoken agreement that no pleasantries are required.

Two streets over, the baker's stall is busier, but still manageable. He waits at the edge until the knot of customers disperses, then steps forward and simply points: flour, a modest measure and wrapped in cloth. The baker's assistant, a tired-looking girl with red flour on her apron, hands it over without question. He gives a small bow in thanks, and she only nods in return.

It's a relief, moving through these errands like smoke, present but unobtrusive. No one asking his name. No one watching his mouth. No one commenting on the way the words sometimes won't come.

With everything bundled close to his chest, Jonas turns back toward the road out of town, the clouds overhead now fully marbled and grey. He'll need to walk quickly if he wants to beat the rain. But for now, his pack is full, his purpose intact, and no one has asked him to explain a single thing.

He has a spiritual envoy to thank. A spiced honey-cake to give to Branwen.

When he arrives back, the estate's kitchen is dim, quiet in the way that only the evening can make it. The coals in the hearth have long since gone grey, but the baking oven still breathes out a soft, ghosted warmth— enough to coax dough into life. Jonas moves with care, weaving through the shadows like a thought half-held, deliberate and quiet. He doesn't touch the tins stacked neatly by the cold shelf or the linen-draped bowls proofing for tomorrow's bread. He's trespassing, he knows that much, but he walks like a pilgrim in sacred space.

The honey, still warm from being tucked against his chest the whole walk home, pours thick and slow into the bowl. Jonas watches it

disappear into the flour, and something in his shoulders unwinds. The scent of clove and orange peel rises with the stir of his spoon. He adds the ginger last, just a pinch, enough to catch in the back of the nose and linger.

It feels good— simple, even— to do something with his hands that no one's told him to do. Something he chose. His kneading is careful and slow. He folds and turns it like he remembers his father doing, back when Jonas was still small enough to reach the table only by standing on a stool. Before his father told him that his stammer would keep him *"on the shelf and never married."*

He's just about to set the bowl aside to rise when the kitchen door bangs open hard enough to rattle the ladles hanging on the wall. Jonas jolts, flinching backward.

"Are you joking?" Fenn's voice cuts in, nasal and sharp. Jonas can feel his pulse spike as Fenn steps further into the kitchen, the door swinging closed behind him with a heavy thud. The lantern flickers in his grip, casting long, wavery shadows across the counter, across Jonas's pale hands clenched around the mixing bowl, "Knew I'd find you down here. Filching from the pantry, are you?"

Jonas stares for a moment, the words refusing to come out of his lips.

Fenn's lip curls, "Just in time for Hearthurn, too. How convenient."

"I— I-I…b-b-b…"

Fenn is wiry, with a narrow, foxlike face and a mop of sandy hair that never quite stays tucked beneath his cap, yet he stalks forward a few steps like a mirewolf, "Oh, that's estate flour, y'know. And gods, is that spice?" He sniffs the air dramatically, "You think you're *owed*

something, just ‘cause Marshal Dog-Tamer barked loud enough to scare off Lord Thedden’s lot? You think you can take things that don’t belong to you?”

Jonas’s chest tightens. He’s seen it: Fenn, loitering around Merrill, catching whispers in the corridor and passing them along with a smirk and a shake of the head. The way the other lads have been watching Jonas lately, like they expect him to strut into the dining hall wearing Branwen’s bloody coat. Since the hunting party, something in the staff halls has changed, something more dramatic than when the chore chart became stricter. The servants are still polite to his face, but he feels the chill. The barbed glances. The bite behind every *“oh, Jonas is busy,”* or *“he’s kennel-duty now, didn’t you hear?”*

He was not fired. But some servants want him gone.

Fenn sneers, “Are you hoping you’ll get to lick the spoon when she’s done?”

“I—th-th-this—th-this *isn’t* f–for H-Hearthurn,” Jonas manages, but the words buckle beneath the pressure, snagging on the roof of his mouth. He tries again, pushing forward, “It’s—it's—n-not—p-pantry—it’s j-just—”

“Just what, Knotjaw?” Fenn laughs, ugly and bright, “Spices and flour don’t belong to you. You think the cook wouldn’t notice? Or were you counting on your new *favourite* to cover for you again?”

Jonas opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. The room tilts with heat and shame. He tries again.

“I—I b-b–bought th-the—” he begins, but Fenn’s already coming closer and reaching.

The honey's the first to go, snatched and tucked under Fenn's arm like contraband. The spice tin follows with a clatter as he scoops it off the counter and tuts like a disapproving schoolmistress. It's ridiculous and entirely transparent. But Jonas watches, frozen, as Fenn moves with deliberate casualness, like he's teaching Jonas a lesson no one else will bother to.

"You know you're not permitted to touch dry goods after hours unless authorized," Fenn says, tone cool and clipped, just formal enough to feign righteousness, just loud enough to carry.

Jonas's voice slips out, small and frayed: "Pl–please… I—I n–need th–that—"

Fenn rolls his eyes up to the rafters, " *Need* ?" he echoes, "You *need* ?"

He takes a step closer.

Jonas reflexively shifts back a half pace, but the bowl's at his hip, the counter behind, nowhere to retreat. He tries again, his hand lifting instinctively toward the tin of spice in Fenn's hands. He holds his ground, his fingers clenched around the bowl so tight his knuckles whiten. Branwen's words echo somewhere at the edge of his hearing—*"You get yourself knocked about again, you're on your own"*— and something in him tries to answer, to rise.

That's when Fenn shoves him.

It's not a hard shove. Just enough to jolt him off-balance. Enough to say *stay in your place* without needing to say anything at all. But it knocks the breath from Jonas's lungs all the same. He stumbles into

the edge of the table, catching himself too late, a hiss of pain slipping from his teeth as his hip jars the corner.

His mouth opens, but no sound comes out. Only a dry gasp. His ears are ringing.

He's never been touched like that by another servant. Not in anger. Not in a place he's meant to feel safe. And the worst part— the *worst* part— is that he doesn't know what to do. Jonas stands there, blinking, trembling faintly, the dough still in the bowl in front of him, its surface half-smoothed, its warmth already fading. His hands hover like they're still waiting for instruction.

"Go on then," Fenn says with mock sweetness, "Tell the Marshal. Or, damn, tell The Lady since she's apparently fond of you too. I'm sure they'll rush down in their dressing gowns to hear all about your little baking tragedy."

Then, with a scoff and a final smug look, he turns and walks off with the stolen ingredients, leaving Jonas alone in the dim, hollow kitchen.

The silence that follows feels colder than it should.

Jonas places the bowl down and presses his palms against the edge of the table, gripping hard. His chest is tight, his breath shallow. Shame pricks behind his eyes, but he swallows it, forces it down where it can't be seen.

It takes a long while before he moves again.

The wind howls like something wounded outside, pressing against the windows with long, aching groans. Thunder rolls across the estate grounds, distant but growing louder with every pulse. The storm hasn't broken yet, but it will. Rain will probably arrive within minutes. The air smells like split stone and smoke, and Jonas can feel the pressure of it behind his teeth.

He lingers near the front hall's window, its heavy drapery pushed aside just enough for him to see the trees bowing in the gusts. The torches out front gutter low, struggling against the wind, their gold light stretched thin. His reflection stares back faintly in the glass—tired and jaw clenched so tight it aches.

He wants to pace, to tear at something, to sob hard and loud and messy until there's nothing left inside, but Quiet March hours are in effect. No noise, not now. Not this late. The Lady's children and their spouses sleep upstairs. The Lady herself, too. Any disturbance would mean more trouble he can't afford.

So he stays still, jaw working uselessly as he presses his fingertips hard against the wooden sill.

He won't go back to the quarters. Not tonight. Not after the shove, not after Fenn's voice festers in his ear like rot, not after losing the one thing he was trying to make right. He can picture it too clearly: Fenn and Merrill laughing about it at their cots, mouths full of stolen honey.

The worst part is how easily he imagines it. How easily he believes it.

He feels pathetic.

That's the word that clings to him, bitter and heavy, worming down his throat and settling in his chest. He balls his hands into fists against the windowsill, trying to will the memory away, but everything replays in his mind like a cruel joke. He bitterly thinks of the bowl of dough scraped into a waste bin like it had never mattered.

Like *he* had never mattered.

His stutter sits in his mouth like a stone. He resents it. Despises it. If he'd just spoken clearly, firmly— *properly* — maybe Fenn would've backed down. Maybe he wouldn't be standing here now, heart aching, skin flushed with shame, stomach sick with helplessness. Maybe he should have gone and bought those tinctures and hoped they would have cured him of his defective mouth.

He presses the heel of his hand hard against his wool token. Even his breath stutters. He wishes, with a sharp and impossible ache, that he were braver. Stronger. *Better.*

But then— Movement.

Out in the courtyard, beyond the wavering torches and battered hedgerows, something shifts. Jonas blinks, leans forward, squinting into the dark. A figure, just past the gate. At first he thinks it's one of the guards doing rounds, but the shape stumbles with an uneven, dragging step, then a pause, like the ground tilted beneath them. Not a soldier. Not steady.

Someone falters. Someone grips the iron gate to catch themselves.

His breath stills. He recognizes them. *It's Branwen.*

For a heartbeat, he doesn't believe it.

Branwen, stumbling?

She's never stumbled. Not in the fields, not with her animals, not even when facing down nobles twice her rank. She's *Branwen* . She's the Hunting Marshal. She's— Jonas's throat tightens— *invincible* . She has the strength he wishes he had, and more.

But the moment her hand slips from the gate and her weight lists again, something in him snaps. He *bolts.*

The corridor behind him blurs as he tears through it, indoor slippers nearly skidding on the flagstones. He shoves open the door— *too loud* , gods, *too loud* for Quiet March hours— but he doesn't care. The wind hits him like a slap, sharp with the smell of wet earth. The rain has started.

It's sparse at first, like a warning. Then harder. Colder. Jonas sprints into it without hesitation.

He reaches her and nearly stops dead again.

Branwen stands half-slumped against the gate post, one hand gripping the wood like she doesn't quite trust the ground. Her hair clings to her face and neck, and her coat hangs crooked from one shoulder, unfastened. But it's her *eyes* that startle him most. They're wide and far-off, unblinking, fixed somewhere beyond the trees. Rain slicks down her cheek, but she doesn't flinch. Doesn't even blink.

“…smells like the creek,” she mutters, voice raw and low, “Same smell when it swallowed them…”

Jonas stills.

The words make no real sense, but something in the *way* she says them roots him in place. There’s an oldness in her tone, ancient and cracked like drought-split earth. Her voice doesn’t even sound like hers. Like she’s not quite *here* , and not quite *now* .

She’s chasing ghosts in the storm.

He steps closer, quiet. The wind catches the edge of his coat and flaps it against his legs.

“Y-you’ll—you’ll c-catch—a c-c-cold,” he says, breathless, then winces at how feeble and small it sounds against the rain. He lifts a hand, almost instinctively, meaning to steady her, maybe guide her back inside, but it hovers uselessly in the air.

He can’t *touch* her. Not like that. Not uninvited. Not as a man.

So he curls his hand into a fist and tucks it to his chest instead. Rain drums on his back, soaks into his sleeves, but he barely notices. He only watches her, heart hammering like hooves on stone.

Branwen doesn’t move. Not even when the wind jerks the gate on its hinges with a hollow clang. Not even when thunder booms so close the stones seem to shake underfoot. Rain begins in earnest now, sheets of it, cold and sudden, and Jonas flinches at the sting of it on his scalp. But she doesn’t react. She stands there, jaw slack, lips parted

just slightly. Her eyes still fixed on nothing, still muttering.

"...Current was too strong..."

Jonas feels panic rising in his throat, thick and hot. She's drowning in some memory he can't see, and the storm is rising fast around them both. He glances back toward the manor. The torches by the stable doors flicker wildly, half-extinguished by the rain, and he knows— *he knows*— he should go get someone. A senior hand. A steward. Even Maud, since this is bad enough.

But that would mean leaving her.

And something deeper than fear roots him here. Something louder than etiquette, louder than protocol, louder than *everything* he's ever been told about where men stand and where women do. He has to do what she did for him the other day.

So he breaks the rules.

He reaches forward, heart thundering, and grabs her shoulder— not hard, just firm enough to *feel* her. And he shakes her.

"M-M-Miss... B-B-B—" His voice cracks from both rain and nerves, "B-Bran— Branwen!"

For a moment, nothing happens.

Then, suddenly, she flinches under his hand when he shakes her again

— eyes blinking fast, breath catching like someone surfacing from underwater. Her brow knits, confused. She looks at him, really *looks* this time. Jonas doesn't even think she's properly heard him.

He quickly pulls his hand back, suddenly aware of how long he's held on. His heart is hammering, "Y–Y–You'll c–catch a c–c–cold," he manages, softer now, but still urgent. "P–P–P–Please… l–l–let's j–just…"

She doesn't reply, doesn't even grunt. She just nods. A small, silent motion, but it shakes him all the same. It's a strange reversal. *She's* the quiet one now, and he's the one who broke the stillness.

Together, they turn back toward the house, the wind chasing them, rain coming harder now. He stays close, ready in case she falters again — but she doesn't.

They step into the entry hall, the heavy door thudding shut behind them. Rain lashes the windows now, thunder pressing close like a held breath. Branwen leans forward slightly, water dripping from her hair as she rakes it back with both hands. Her fingers work slowly through the knots, wringing it out in thick ropes that slap softly against her shoulders.

Jonas watches, breath shallow. Her face is pale beneath the torchlight — not shaken, exactly, but distant. Hardened, maybe, the way grief sometimes hardens. That blank, dogged look of someone holding everything in through sheer force. She's no longer out of it, but the storm hasn't entirely left her either.

Then, without looking at him, she says stiffly, like it pains her to break the silence, "Don't tell anyone I said that."

Jonas swallows.

“N–n–n–no,” he stammers softly, “I–I–I w–w–won’t.”

His voice barely rises above the hiss of rain on stone, but it’s steady with intent. A promise, not just of silence, but of understanding. A vow that her private unravelling stays hers, as safe as he can keep it. She’d stood for him in front of nobles, and sat with him in his shame. She’d said his name like it mattered.

He can’t bake her the spiced honey-cake, not yet. But this much he *can* do.

Branwen rolls her shoulder, water streaming down her sleeve, “I’ll sleep on one of the couches in the laundry room,” she mutters, already turning as though eager to put the moment behind her, “Better than waking up in a mudhole.”

Jonas nods quickly, awkwardly— too awkwardly— his hand twitching like he might offer help before thinking better of it.

“You should go get dry,” she adds, before walking off toward the side corridor.

Jonas exhales. He should feel better. She’s safe now. She’s inside. And maybe that should be enough. He turns, running a trembling hand over his damp hair— and that’s when he hears it.

A thin, reedy whistle, carries on the wind like a thread of glass. It’s quiet, barely more than a breath beneath the next roll of thunder. Almost nothing.

Almost.

But his whole body tenses. His mouth goes dry.

That sound…

It presses somewhere behind his ribs, soft and cold, as though some invisible hand had reached through time to poke a bruise only he remembered. His grandmother's voice comes unbidden, sharp as brittle twine in the dark: " *Don't answer when it calls. Don't look for it. And if you hear whistling when the storm is fierce and the wind is low — run."*

He clenches his fists. *No. No. Not now. Don't think about it. You're supposed to be grown. You're helping Branwen. You're trying to be strong. You can't have your honey-cake stolen and be scared of—*

Another whistle.

He sucks in a sharp breath— tries to swallow it back— but a tiny, strangled yelp escapes his throat anyway. Jonas freezes like a scolded cat, heart thudding loud enough he's sure it'll wake the whole bloody manor. He clutches his coat tighter, mentally cursing himself for being so jumpy, so *weak* , so—

"You alright there?"

He nearly jumps out of his skin. Branwen is leaning in the archway, arms crossed, wet hair dripping down her shoulders. He hadn't even

heard her come back. He stiffens, wide-eyed, like he could scare the thought away just by standing very still. The manor around him groans. Rain batters the windows. Somewhere upstairs, a shutter banged. Or something that *sounded* like a shutter. He is going to die of fright. In front of Branwen. Not from nobles or the storm or even Fenn, but from *some stupid ghost with a flute.*

"I–I–I j-j-just thought I heard—th-thought I—" His mouth twists. It's no use pretending, "Gh-gh-gh-ghost," he mumbles, shame blooming hot behind his ears. And then, as if his own brain is trying to get him expelled from polite society:

"B–b–b–bloody f–fine time for it, isn't it—"

His eyes go wider.

His hand is slapped over his mouth, but it's too late.

He doesn't swear. He's *not* supposed to swear. Especially not *bloody* . Not *uncouthly* , and certainly not in earshot of a woman. What was he thinking? What *is* he thinking today? Between the honey-cake, the storm, Branwen staggering in the courtyard like a ghost herself, and now this— he's clearly losing his *damn* mind.

Branwen stares. A beat of silence stretches— And then a sound.

Not sharp laughter. Not mockery, but a low huff of breath. *Almost* a laugh. When he risks a glance, he sees it: a crooked smile, weary but true.

"You've been wound tighter than a cart-spring these past couple of

days," She mutters, *amused,* "Relax, would you? I've heard worse. Said worse. Today, even."

Her tone is *kind* and not mocking. The warmth in it lands somewhere between his ribs and his sternum. He lowers his hand, still flushed, and gives the smallest, sheepish nod. Jonas exhales slowly. He's a wreck. He knows it. And yet somehow, in her company, it doesn't feel entirely like a failing.

Her brow lifts slightly, "So, ghosts too, huh? Let me guess. The Whistler?"

Now his jaw goes slack as he stares at her, despite himself.

Branwen lets out a short, tuneless whistle that echoes faintly down the corridor. It's the same sound. Jonas feels his face warm further— *Oh. It was her.*

"Thought so," Branwen says, "Wasn't trying to scare you. Just whistling to myself."

And then she *actually chuckles* — a rough, quiet sound. She shakes her head and shrugs.

Jonas opens and closes his mouth, stunned. He doesn't know what to say. Part of him still wants to sink into the floor from embarrassment. But more than that, the warmth continues spreading across his chest. It's strange and soft.

She seems a little less weighed down now. Just a little. And maybe that's something.

She gestures back toward the hallway, “Go on. Dry yourself off before your teeth start rattling.”

He nods, too quickly and too eager, “Y-y-y–yes. G-g-g-goodnight.”

Branwen pauses at the turn, glancing back for just a second, “Night, Jonas.”

She disappears down the corridor, the sound of her boots soft on the flagstones.

Jonas stays where he is, the echo of her brief chuckle still wrapped around his ribs. He swallows. Then, quietly, solemnly, he makes a promise to himself:

He *will* try baking something for her again.

Chapter End Notes

pathetic blorbo realness

Chapter 4: Interlude: The Land Remembers

Chapter Summary

> Surprise, you get a pointless backstory chapter because I wanna get to another chapter more quickly. yeehaw.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before the flood, Branwen thought her world was exactly the right size: one valley, one family, one village where people knew your name and your dogs by scent.

It is a poor place, squat and sun-bleached, its homes packed with clay and straw and hope that barely held through the winters. A Freehold village, which means no noble crest stamped on their doors and no velvet-robed matron to bring down food when lean months bit hard. Just the eastern hills, scrub grass, and hard soil, and the faint promise that if they kept their heads down and paid what taxes they could, they might be left alone.

The roofs sagged. The lanes turn to sludge in the rain. Chickens wandered wherever they pleased. But it was home.

And her sisters— Her sisters were her everything.

Hesta, the eldest, is all freckled arms and long strides, clever with knots and quick with a dare. She, like everyone else, wears her hair in a tight braid to keep it out of the butter churn, and always has nettle stings along her forearms.

Meinwen is narrower, quieter and sharper around the edges. She's

already gutting hares and skinning them with Mam, and still has the cleanest handwriting in the valley. Not that she has much competition in that regard, most Freeholders write in messy and barely legible scrawls, if at all.

And then there's Branwen, the youngest. Mostly knees and elbows back then, always trailing behind and trying to keep up.

She is ten when she chases Hesta through the orchard with a clump of goat dung in her hand.

"You smug sow!" She shrieks, dodging low branches and slipping on wet grass, "You told her I broke the churn paddle!"

Hesta, six years older and fleet-footed, only laughs over her shoulder, "You did break it, Bran! You sat on it like a sack of turnips!"

Their middle sister, Meinwen, sits perched on a half-toppled stone fence, stitching leather straps for a hound harness, her needle flashing like a fishhook. "She's got a point, runt," she says, not looking up, "You've got the arse of a workhorse and the grace of one too."

Branwen, breathing hard, skids to a halt just as Hesta rounds the tree and trips on a root and falls. A triumphant whoop tears from Branwen's throat as she hurls the dung, only to miss entirely and splatter the nearest apple trunk instead.

"You idiot!" Hesta howls, face red with laughter and exertion.

"You're both idiots," Meinwen adds serenely, shaking her head, "And we wonder why Mam goes grey."

The sun is low over the ridge, golden against the orchard leaves. Somewhere, a dog barks once, then twice, before the hills swallow the sound. Branwen swipes mud from her knees. This it is enough— for now, for a time… Even though they had come to this orchard to pick apples, only to find none of them to be ripe or edible despite the rain they've had. A poor season. But flinging goat dung serves as a good distraction from the lack of food.

Branwen flips her damp braid over her shoulder and marches back toward her sisters with the righteous air of someone who'd *almost* landed a hit, "You're just jealous your arse wouldn't survive a churn paddle either."

"Oh, *please* ," Hesta says, getting to her feet, "I'd snap it over your thick skull first."

They fall in step together, seeing who can out-whistle the other and feet squelching in the grass as they start the walk back toward the farm, their baskets empty. The rain has passed, but the trees still drip like old women spitting. A sharp wind rolls over the hills, carrying with it the smell of wet earth, dung, and the faint tang of goatskin being scraped clean.

Their farm is set on the curve of a shallow ridge, near a creek and where hardy things grow. Scrub sheep and goats dot the slope like pale stones, and root vegetables that are meant to grow in neat rows— though Branwen can't tell how much has grown yet, and they're meant to harvest. Their mother's hound pens, the pride of the village, sit to the east, where thick fences and thorn hedges keep the dogs from bolting into the hills.

"Ugh, I hate the smell after rain," Hesta mutters, crinkling her nose.

“You hate everything that doesn’t come with velvet trim,” Branwen says.

Meinwen only hums in response, adjusting the coil of leather straps under her arm, “Velvet's expensive. If Hesta actually makes something of herself, maybe we’ll all get one of those fancy ribbons those passing clerks wear."

Branwen snorts, “If Hesta gets herself noticed by the rich folk, she’ll be too busy pretending she never knew us.”

“Piss off,” Hesta says mildly, “I’ll send for you. You can muck the stables at my future estate, you little runt.”

Branwen steps ahead of them and makes a grand show of bowing low, her voice becoming exaggerated with condescending pompousness, “As you wish, my lady. Shall I bow to your hounds too?”

“Don’t bother,” Meinwen adds, “Hesta would make sure to make them bite you on sight.”

That sends all three into another fit of laughter, light and sharp in the cooling dusk. Branwen can hardly picture Hesta in silks or fine boots, but stranger things had happened. Girls from Freehold villages *had* made something of themselves before: gotten taken on as ward-companions or stewards, or even apprenticed at estate kennels if their hounds were good enough.

And if one daughter made it out, it meant something for all of them. A brighter name on the registry. A better offer next season. Even the boys might get a better posting when they came of age. A daughter or son making it out— it could even mean getting a last name.

They pass neighbours along the way, women mending the edge of a sod roof with reeds and pitch, another gutting a goat with steady hands while her daughter collects the stomachs in a bucket. A pair of men sit by a stump, watching a pack of younger children wrestle in the grass and mud. One snaps to attention when a toddler bursts into tears, scooping them up before they can wail loud enough to carry.

They're nearly to the gate when a boy— maybe nine or ten, scrawny but with a too-large tunic cinched at the waist— comes trotting up the path. Carwyn, another neighbour. His father helps mend everyone's clothes, and his mother is no longer in the picture. She left them years ago. The boy looks between them, then lifts a folded square of paper in both hands like it's sacred.

"Hesta?" He asks, voice cracking slightly, "Can— can you read this for my Pa? He thinks it's from my aunt, but he's not sure."

Hesta takes the note. She skims it, lips twitching, "Says her cousin finally coughed up the last of the chickens, but the fox got two on the road home. Still, she'll send eggs next week."

The boy beams, thanks her, and takes off again at a jog. Freehold villages don't teach boys to read or write. Their own Pa has picked up some things over the years, but still needs their help here and there. Wealthier women in wealthier towns prefer men illiterate if they pick one up from a Freehold village— So not being able to read increases Carwyn's chances of one day living richer, no matter how tiny those chances may be to begin with.

The sisters enter the farm. The air smells of sweat and goat piss, it's rich and familiar. A wind stirs the drying lines where woollen underthings flap like lazy flags.

They're barely two steps in when their Mam, arms braced on her hips and apron streaked with blood, calls them over from the goat pen, "We've got a breechling, and I'll not have another die just 'cause its mother's stubborn. Hesta, you're on the hind. Meinwen, get Cobble in place. Branwen—"

"Let me stay!" Branwen blurts, already knowing what her Mam will say, "I can hold something! I can—"

"No, I see no apples," Mam cuts in, voice firm, "So you'll go dig supper turnips with your Pa. He needs help too."

Branwen's face twists, "That's not real help, that's just dirt!"

"Lucky you, then," Meinwen says, already jogging off to the kennels, two fingers in her mouth to whistle. A lean hound named Cobble comes racing at the sound, paws kicking up mud.

"Go on," Hesta says without looking, sleeves rolled to her elbows as she crouches beside their Mam, who's already got her hand inside the labouring goat, "We've got blood and braying here. You'd faint from the smell."

"I wouldn't," Branwen grumbles, but she doesn't fight it. Much.

Their Pa waits near the root bed with a dull-pronged fork and a burlap sack. He's not a tall man, built more for close work than heavy lifting, and there's a stoop to his shoulders that speaks of years hunched over the hearth and cooking food. Wrapped around his wrist is a cord, tied there by Mam. It's something for luck, something most Freehold women put on their husbands.

He greets her with a grunt, passing the fork without fuss, “Watch your toes.”

Branwen digs, fuming. The turnips, what little she finds, fight her, roots clinging deep in the soil. The cold creeps into her boots. Her fingers ache. Her braid keeps slipping over her shoulder and smearing her face. She wants to be with her sisters, where the real work is. Where things bleed and matter and maybe even die.

Pa, to his credit, says nothing about her sulking. Just works beside her in steady silence, plucking out weeds and casting the good roots into the sack between them.

“Not all help’s flashy,” he says eventually, “Doesn’t mean it’s not worth doing.”

Branwen stabs the fork into the dirt again, tongue between her teeth, lips chapped from the wind. “When I’m older,” she huffs, hauling up a stubborn turnip that’s smaller than it should be, “I’ll help with births, and fix fences, and butcher, and run the dogs. I’ll do *everything* Hesta and Meinwen do. Better, even.”

Her father chuckles, the low sort that rumbles in his chest like a kettle beginning to boil, “You think that’s *women’s* work, do you?” he teases, eyes crinkling at the corners.

Branwen pauses, fork in hand. “…Isn’t it?”

“Well, suppose so. But if you haven’t noticed,” he gestures vaguely toward the house, where laundry flaps wild on the line and smoke curls from a crooked chimney, “There’s no sons to speak of. No uncles left neither. So we all do what needs doing, together, don’t we?”

He stretches his back with a groan, brushing dirt from his knees, “Your sisters slop hogs and mend yokes. I learned to spin twine before I had chest hair. Your Mam can dig a post-hole straighter than any woman I’ve ever met. So you—” he taps the handle of the fork, “You’ll do a little bit of everything too. Not because you’re a girl. Because you’re one of *us* .”

Branwen considers that, staring at the earth. Then she plunges the fork down again with new conviction. After a moment, she realizes Pa has stopped digging.

“Bran,” He says flatly, “Is that goat dung on your fingers?”

Branwen blinks down at the crusted smear still clinging to the edges of her nails.

“...Might be.”

The day stretches long. They strip what carrots and turnips they can, stomp mud from their boots, help mend the fence where a sheep forced its way through. Meinwen coaxes Cobble into the house with scraps and a cooed lullaby, humming through the low-sun hours. Hesta ends up with goat’s blood on her arms past the elbow, and their Mam scrubs up at the water barrel, muttering about how everything seems to come too late or too early this season.

The baby goat didn't make it.

By the time evening settles like a blanket over the hills, the family's back inside their crooked farmhouse, roof patched with whatever thatch or tarp could be bartered over the last few years. The front stoop slants, the door sticks in the wet, and the boards groan with every footstep. It's always cold in the corners, and wind finds every crack.

Inside, some dogs are curled by the hearth and peat smoke curled up from the stone chimney. Mismatched and cracked mugs are stacked on an open shelf. The walls are hung with thick woven cloth, not for decoration but insulation. A cracked clay icon of a harvest-goddess presides over the mantle— not one of the high ladies of the noble pantheons, but a local spirit of wind and growth, her face rubbed smooth from years of reverent hands.

There's a saying in the village: *Even stone can bloom, if the women are stubborn enough.* It's meant to be humourous, but also sacred. A charm against failure. Every family has their own version scratched into wood or etched into a hearthstone.

Their Pa ladles stew into bowls, thin broth, mostly barley and turnip. No meat tonight, not really. Just a few shreds clinging to bone, boiled so long the marrow's gone grey. He doesn't sit until everyone else has started eating.

"Sheep and goats aren't making enough lambs and kids for us to butcher them. We have to save their numbers," Mam had said once, when Branwen complained about the lack of meat. She hadn't known what it meant at the time.

Their Mam, who never once thanks aloud, hums her approval between slow, deliberate spoonfuls. Hesta tears a crust of bread in half for her sisters, but it's stale and dense, baked two days ago and stretched thin across too many meals. Meinwen offers Cobble a sliver of gristle under the table, scratching the dog's ears like an apology.

Branwen slurps the stew happily, cheeks full and chin dripping, and chirps, “Best turnips we’ve had this week!” She doesn’t notice how her father’s jaw tightens. Or how Hesta pointedly gives her the heel of the bread without taking any for herself.

She instead watches the firelight dance on the rafters and counts the days until she’s grown.

She’s not sure what she’ll do then. Hunt wolves, maybe, or train dogs like the old women in the southern hills. Something *strong*.

When dinner’s finished, all three girls share a too-small bed in the corner of the single large room, layered in wool and old pelts. The atmosphere changes to something more light, not that Branwen had noticed anything to begin with. She usually sleeps at the foot, often waking with her legs half off the mattress and her nose pressed to someone’s elbow.

But sometimes they bicker for space.

The three of them crawl into the lumpy straw mattress like coals in an overstuffed stove, limbs already tangling before they’ve even settled. The quilt is patched and scratchy and the bedframe groans if anyone so much as breathes.

“Move over,” Meinwen hisses, elbowing Branwen squarely in the ribs.

“I *can’t* ! Hesta’s hogging all the room!”

“I’m eldest,” Hesta declares, already curled up with the warmest pelt, “I get more room by rights.”

“Oh, get stuffed,” Meinwen snaps, grabbing the edge of the blanket and giving it a sharp yank.

“Oi!” Hesta tugs back, “You tear that and Pa’ll make you stitch it with a thorn needle!”

Branwen, wedged between them like a sack of potatoes, grumbles, “If I die in the night, I hope they bury me in the goat pen so I can haunt you both.”

“Ha! Like anyone’d *notice* ,” Hesta scoffs, “We’d just assume the stink was your feet.”

“Give me that pelt!” Branwen launches a half-hearted swipe at the one draped over Hesta’s legs. Hesta swats her away, but Branwen catches another, thinner pelt near the foot of the bed and hurls it into Meinwen’s face.

“Oi!” Meinwen flings it back, hitting Hesta instead.

“Right, that’s it— *war* ,” Hesta announces, and before anyone can protest, a flurry of pelts are flying through the air. Branwen shrieks with laughter, half-smothered by wool. Someone knocks the lamp over, but the flame’s already out.

After a few minutes of muffled shrieking and breathless wheezing, silence returns. Sort of. A final elbow is nudged into Branwen’s spine.

“Meinwen,” She groans.

“Serves you right.”

Hesta’s voice is smug in the dark, “This is why I should get my own bed.”

“In your dreams,” Meinwen mutters.

And eventually, between the tangle of legs, stolen pelts, and mock threats of sororicide, Branwen falls asleep too.

As she snores, she does not hear her sisters whisper about how thin things have gotten.

A year later, Branwen wakes to the sound of the wind threading through the chinks in the walls, soft and sharp like a whistle through teeth. The fire’s gone to embers, and Meinwen’s already up, shrugging on her patched cloak with that quiet, practiced determination that always makes Branwen feel small and awkward in comparison. Hesta is next, pulling her braid into a loop and muttering something about her needle fingers being too cold to tie cords properly.

Their Pa hands them each a coil of dyed hemp— crimson, ochre, and sky-blue— still faintly stiff with last year’s dye. Branwen cradles the blue one like it’s a ribbon of sky torn just for her. Her fingers are cold, but her chest is warm with pride. She knows what today means.

It’s the Tethering.

They step out into the yard just as the sun begins bleeding over the ridgeline, gold seeping into the frost-hardened soil. Branwen shivers in her too-short cloak and the boots handed down through both her sisters, but her heart beats fast.

Across the village, others are stirring. Children stumbling sleepily from doors and parents calling instructions with their dogs circling barns. There’s no pomp to it, no bells or feasts, just the quiet weight of ritual and the scent of earth readying itself to yield. A woman from two farms down is already tying her family’s cords, her son holding the ends steady. Further up the slope, a girl around Meinwen’s age stoops over a garden bed, marking the fencepost with charcoal.

Their house’s post stands a few paces from the door, worn smooth with years. Hesta kneels first, driving a nail into the wood with a sure hand and looping her ochre cord through it with a sailor’s knot. Meinwen follows, a bit more delicate but no less precise.

Branwen steps forward last, her breath catching in her throat. She ties her blue cord with shaking fingers, then stands back, heart pounding.

All three cords stretch from the doorknob to the fencepost, taut and neat like promises spun into thread.

Her Mam nudges her gently, “Go on now.”

Branwen squares her shoulders and places both hands on the middle cord.

“We’ll stay,” She says, as clearly as she can, even though her voice quavers, “We’ll hold. The land will know our names.”

The words settle over the yard like mist. The silence that follows is sacred.

Branwen feels the truth of it, how the cords root them here, not just to the land but to each other. This valley and its hills. Her sisters beside her. Their crooked little house. The dogs, the goats, the sheep and the stubborn apple trees. It is, to her, the entire world. She can’t imagine leaving it.

She glances at Meinwen, who is looking at the cord with an unreadable expression, her lips moving silently. Maybe repeating the words, maybe not.

Hesta’s gaze is on the horizon, squinting against the sunrise.

Branwen doesn’t notice. She’s still caught in the swell of it, of duty and belonging, and she doesn’t see the slight shift in her sisters’ postures. The kind of weight that isn’t anticipation, but farewell.

Later, after they’ve tucked the cords behind the door to keep them from catching in the wind, they go about the rest of the day. Chores, patching fence gaps, feeding the dogs, splitting kindling.

The land will know their names, Branwen thinks as she scrapes frost off the garden stones. Hers. Hesta’s. Meinwen’s.

She doesn't know that one of them's already begun writing her name somewhere else.

In the afternoon, once the chores are finished, Branwen slips away with a dull knife and a pocketful of flattened driftwood pieces she collected from the creekbank last summer. She crouches by the stone edge of the vegetable plot, tongue peeking out in concentration as she carves into the soft, sun-bleached wood.

Three runes: one for steadiness, one for plenty, and one to keep blight at bay. She scratches them in slowly, pressing until her knuckles ache. The lines aren't perfect, she's still learning, but she does her best. She places the finished tokens at the base of bean poles, tucking them in as if the roots might reach for the blessings.

It's a quiet sort of hope, almost a bargain. A whispered plea to the harvest goddess: *Just a better year, please. Just enough to fill our bellies when the frost returns.*

Last year, the season had went from bad to worse. The garden yellowed too soon. The squash came in small and bitter. Goats and sheep miscarried, and their Pa sold two dogs just to get through Deepfrost. Hesta gave up meat for weeks so Branwen and Meinwen could have broth. Meinwen's hands cracked from too much cold and too little salve. They'd told stories by the fire to fill the silence of empty stomachs, pretending it didn't matter.

But Branwen remembers. And now, she presses her palms together and bows her head, not just for luck, but for change.

Unbeknownst to her, Hesta watches from the porch, arms crossed and face unreadable. She doesn't interrupt. Doesn't offer to help. Just watches her baby sister carve prayers into driftwood like it might be enough. Later that week, Meinwen spends a long time smoothing the

pages of a tattered letter she's hidden in her butchering tin.

And Branwen? She hums to herself, hopeful as new shoots. The cords are tied, the runes are placed, and surely— *surely* — this year will be different.

The spring thaw is slower.

The frost clings to the soil like a warning, and when the ground finally softens, it does so reluctantly, sucking at boots and wheels, reluctant to yield anything good. The root cellar is already half-empty when planting begins.

Hesta wakes before the birds most mornings now. Her face is leaner and sterner. There's a line between her brows that wasn't there the year before. She doesn't sing when mucking out the goat pen anymore. Doesn't tease Meinwen about her poor needlework or call Branwen a runt when she lags behind. She just works. Harder than ever. Silently, mostly.

The goats have birthed poorly, with another two dead kids this season, one born too early and another crushed under its mother's flank in the night. Their Mam had muttered something low and bitter, lit a beeswax candle despite how few they had left, and spat once in the dirt for luck.

The apple trees bud late. The ewes are skittish. A weasel takes a hen. One of the hounds comes back limping after chasing off a wildcat.

Still, Branwen is undeterred.

She trails her sisters through muddy furrows, her feet too small to step where they step, arms swinging proudly with a woven basket of seed that's half as full as it ought to be. Her hair is unkempt and her boots are worn, but she beams every time Meinwen lets her scatter seed with her own hands. It's no longer men's work— at least, not when she does it with her sisters.

"Did I do it right?" She asks for the third time that morning, brushing soil off her palms and squinting at the uneven rows she helped plant.

Meinwen gives her a sideways glance, lips twitching faintly, "You'll know come harvest. Or when Mam sees how crooked your lines are."

"I'll do better tomorrow," Branwen says, "I'll plant straighter than Hesta."

Hesta, hoeing a few meters ahead, doesn't turn, "You couldn't plant straighter than a one-eyed pig with a limp."

Branwen scowls and sticks out her tongue, "I could if the pig taught me."

But the laughter dies quickly, as laughter often does lately.

By midday, the sun is high, but the wind still bites through their threadbare tunics. Their Pa stops to stretch his back, knees creaking audibly as he sets down a crate. He doesn't say much, but the glance he shares with Mam over the rows says enough. Branwen doesn't notice. She's still busy mimicking Meinwen's movements, her brow furrowed in exaggerated concentration, puffing up with pride when she gets her footwork almost right.

The girls take turns hauling buckets of water from the stream, patching fences, brushing the dogs, and darning holes. Branwen still tries to do it all, trying to be everywhere at once, and failing just as often. She's always a step too slow, a bit too weak, but she never stops trying.

She never notices the wear in Meinwen's smile. Never sees Hesta pause just a moment longer than necessary, staring off over the hills again. She just sees her sisters— taller, stronger, wiser— and knows, with the fierce conviction only an eleven-year-old can muster, that she will never leave them. That they'll be together forever, regardless of the harvest.

The hill wind cuts sharp across the pasture, carrying with it the smell of sheep and damp earth. Branwen scrambles over the low stone wall, her boots muddy to the ankle, and joins her sisters where they stand watching Mam fuss with the hound whistle.

Mam's hair is pinned back with a kerchief, her hands red from the cold, but she holds the whistle as if it's a fine silver instrument. Branwen knows the truth: it's dented, the leather thong cracked, and the sound it makes is more like a crow choking on a pebble than any proper call. Mam raises it to her lips. A shrill, uneven note bursts into the air, startling the nearest ewe. Two hounds lift their heads from where they've been gnawing on old bones, ears pricked, then promptly lie back down.

"Better try again," Hesta says, deadpan, tucking her hands into the crook of her elbows but there's a smirk tugging at her mouth.

"It's the wind," Mam says, though there isn't much conviction in it.

She blows again, louder this time, but the note warbles so badly that Meinwen snorts.

Branwen tries to stifle her own laugh, but it escapes in a puff of white breath, “It sounds like the kettle when it’s nearly done,” she says, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

Mam shoots her a look, half stern, but her eyes crinkle, “A whistle’s a whistle. The hounds don’t care how pretty it sounds.”

“But they didn’t come,” Hesta points out.

“They’re thinking about it,” Mam says, and blows once more. This time the sound is steadier, and the hounds finally get to their feet, tails wagging as they trot over. One, Cobble, licks Branwen’s muddy hand, leaving it wet and cold.

Branwen crouches to scratch behind the dog’s ears, grinning. The whistle might not be perfect, but it’s Mam’s. In Branwen’s mind, that means it’s part of the farm, like the leaning fence posts and the cracked water trough. Mam slips the whistle back into her pocket and claps her hands. “Come on, girls. Let’s get the flock down before the light goes.”

The three sisters fall in step behind her, their laughter still drifting over the pasture, carried away by the same wind that never quite lets the land rest.

As they start down the slope, Branwen can’t resist one more jab.

“You know, Mam,” She says, picking her way around a thistle clump,

“If you ever lost that whistle, you’d be doomed. You can’t whistle proper even if your life depended on it.”

Meinwen snickers behind her hand, and Hesta outright laughs, the sound echoing in the still air.

Mam turns, walking backwards a few steps, her brows lifting in mock offence, “I can so whistle,” she declares, and puts two fingers to her lips. She blows hard. The result is not a whistle at all. It’s more of a wet, breathy wheeze, like air escaping from a cracked bellows. One of the hounds cocks its head, puzzled, then sneezes.

All three sisters are in stitches now, nearly tripping over the tussocks. Branwen doubles over, clutching her sides, her cheeks aching from grinning. Even Mam breaks, laughter spilling out of her until she has to stop and catch her breath. It’s small moments like these that make them forget, just for a second, about how hungry they are.

“Fine,” Mam says at last, still chuckling, “Maybe it’s best I leave the whistling to the whistle,” She pats her pocket, the metal shape pressing against the worn fabric. “Good thing I’ve got it, then, eh?”

Branwen glances at the faint bulge where it rests. She doesn’t know why she feels a little warmer inside at the thought of it always being there, but she does. The sisters follow her down toward the low valley, the hounds padding close, the last of the daylight catching on the damp grass. Branwen feels the kind of happiness she doesn’t have words for, but it settles somewhere deep, as steady as the hills themselves.

The three girls tease their Mam by whistling the entire way down.

It happens near the end of the planting season, on a warm, dusty morning when the goats are restless. The household wakes early as always, but Mam's voice carries differently when she calls the girls inside.

"Hesta," She says, not unkindly, "Go wash and put on the wrapcloth. We'll light the hearth soon."

Branwen watches from the doorway, a half-peeled root in her hand, blinking owlishly, "What's going on?"

Meinwen lifts her chin from the spindle she's working and says, matter-of-fact, "She's bleeding."

Branwen's mouth drops open, "From where?"

Hesta groans, face already flushed, "Don't you *start* ."

"She means *her moonblood,* " Mam clarifies with a small, amused huff, taking a kettle off the hook and pouring water into a basin, "It's time."

Pa pauses mid-stride by the firewood stack, a bundle of kindling under one arm. For a moment, he's still, then a slow, wistful smile creeps across his weather-creased face. He sets the bundle down by the hearth with care, as if the house has become a shrine. It has, in a way.

Mam doesn't look up as she pours water into the washbasin, "We'll need the cedar box."

“I know where it is,” He replies softly. He crosses the floor and opens the small cabinet behind the hearth, retrieving the carved wooden box with a kind of reverence. His calloused fingers brush the lid like it might sing beneath them.

Branwen gasps and claps both hands over her mouth, forgetting the peelings entirely. “ *Already?* ”

She eyes her sister with renewed reverence as though Hesta has transformed overnight into a grown woman with mysterious, ancient power. Hesta glowers and pulls the door curtain closed with more force than strictly necessary, muttering something about not being *ready for this shite* .

But the house begins to hum with quiet preparation.

Pa’s eyes move to Hesta, half-hiding behind the curtain, arms crossed over her chest and mouth tight with unease, “You’ll be fine,” He tells her, “You come from strong blood.”

She doesn’t answer, but there’s the faintest twitch at the corner of her mouth. Then, with one last glance at all of them, Pa pulls on his coat, “I’ll check the fences,” he says to no one in particular.

And just like that, he leaves, as all men do during this rite. Stepping aside so that the women can be alone.

The tattooing tools are brought out from the cedar box— simple, careful tools that smell of smoke and resin. The ink is ground from boiled ash and the bitter-red heart of a root that only grows near riverbeds. It's said to be blessed by the harvest goddess herself. The

whole process is sacred in the village, not just a marking of fertility, but of power. A girl who bleeds can grow food, bury the dead, claim a parcel of land if she dares. She can one day choose a partner, or not. She's accounted for in votes during seasonal councils. She can leave, if she's brave enough.

The eldest daughter always goes first. But— not them. They're Tethered. That has to mean something.

Branwen sits cross-legged near the hearth, eyes wide as saucers. Her task is simple: keep the dye warm. She stirs it dutifully in its little clay bowl, biting her lip to contain the rush of envy and excitement. The tattoo is done across the upper back, just beneath the shoulder blades. Not large or elaborate, but it's meaningful. Three braided cords: one for kin, one for land, one for choice. The cords always begin on the left side and weave toward the spine.

Mam does the first lines with careful pressure. Meinwen holds Hesta's shoulders steady. Hesta bites into a strip of leather and stares ahead with the stony focus of someone climbing an unsteady roof in a windstorm.

Branwen watches every movement.

"Will mine look the same?" She asks, leaning forward so close she nearly tips the bowl.

Mam glances at her without pausing, "No two are the same, Bran. Yours will come in time. You've still got years to earn it."

"I don't *want* to wait years," Branwen mutters, "I'm strong enough already. Ask Pa."

That earns a low chuckle from Meinwen, “Your arms are twigs, Bran.”

Hesta, voice thick behind the leather, manages a grunt, “T-tattoo yourself, then. See how strong you feel *after.* ”

Branwen pouts but doesn’t look away. Even as Hesta flinches and stiffens and breathes through her nose, Branwen is rapt— *awed.* It’s as if her sister is becoming part of the land itself, carved and weathered and permanent. Strong in the way mountains are strong.

Later, when it’s done and Hesta sits with her back uncovered by the fire, drinking goat’s milk laced with birch syrup to steady her stomach, Branwen brings over the warm cloths. She lays them at her sister’s side like an offering, then whispers, “I can’t *wait* to get mine. I bet the prissy nobles don’t get proper fierce tattoos for their bleeding. They probably just cry into silk sheets and ring little bells for someone to mop it up!”

Meinwen snorts, “You’re insufferable.”

Hesta, sitting stiffly on the stool with her back bared and hair tied up, casts a glance over her shoulder, “Be careful what you wish for, runt. It *hurts* .”

Branwen shrugs, undeterred, “So? I stepped on a thistle this yesterday morning and *didn’t* cry.”

Mam doesn’t look up as she continues methodically tattooing Hesta’s back, “You limped for an hour and called the thistle a ‘cow-faced devil bush.’”

Branwen huffs, “That was strategic limping.”

Hesta snorts, despite herself.

Outside, the goats bleat. Smoke rises from the chimney. And in the flickering firelight, the ink on Hesta’s back begins to dry— three black cords binding her to the women who came before, and to the girl who still believes she’ll never leave.

Hesta changes following her first bleeding. Branwen notices the change when she stops waiting for her.

Not in a cruel way, not at first. Just little things. She walks ahead on the paths now, not always slowing when Branwen calls out. She lingers longer in the evenings with Mam after supper, heads bowed close over parchment that’s swiftly tucked away when Branwen enters. She stops laughing at Branwen’s jokes. Stops teasing her when she fumbles a throw, or trips over a root.

At first, Branwen tells herself it’s just the tattoo. That fierce, curling mark inked into Hesta’s shoulder blade like a piece of the mountain itself. It’s not just a mark, it’s a change. It’s meant to be.

Still, it bothers her.

“You’re acting strange,” Branwen grumbles one morning as they scrub out the milking pails, elbow-deep in cold lye-water, “All silent and far off, like Meinwen when she’s sulking.”

“I’m not sulking,” Hesta says flatly.

“You are.”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Just admit it. Is it the tattoo? Does it still hurt?”

Hesta sighs, low and heavy, like her soul’s older than it ought to be at seventeen, “Maybe I just don’t have time for little-girl games anymore.”

Branwen flinches like she’s been slapped, “I’m not a little girl.”

“You are, Bran.” Hesta doesn’t meet her eyes, “It’s not a bad thing. Just true.”

Branwen scrubs harder, jaw clenched, “Why are you acting like something's wrong? Like— Like you hate it here.”

At that, Hesta’s hand stutters on the rim of the bucket. Her eyes are not on Branwen but on some far-off point beyond the window.

“I don’t hate it,” She says eventually, voice low, “I just… I don’t think this is all there is.”

Branwen rolls her eyes, “That’s what folk say before they fall off a cliff chasing stories.”

Hesta gives a humourless smile, “And what if I’d rather fall than rot?”

“We’re not rotting,” Branwen snaps, “We’ve got the dogs. And the sheep and goats. And the orchard will give again, Mam says so. It’s just— just a hard stretch.”

But she doesn’t stop there, once the words fall she keeps talking. Branwen quickly gets on a tear, becoming red-faced and prickling with that hot, childish frustration, “What even *is* wrong with you lately? You don’t laugh, you don’t tell me things, and you’re always off with Mam or down by the old field, like you’re waiting for something. You’re not *going* anywhere, are you?”

Silence. Hesta finally looks at her. There’s something in her face Branwen doesn’t recognize.

Branwen snorts, trying to sound brave, “Where would you even go, anyway? We live in a hole in the hills. You’d have to walk through five ridges just to find someone who can write your name. Unless—” She squints, suddenly suspicious, “Unless that merchant girl last market day said something to you. The one with the blue nails and the silk shoes. I *knew* she was sniffing around—”

“Enough, Branwen,” Hesta snaps. It’s sharp enough to slice through the steam and soap. It halts Branwen mid-rant.

For a long moment, Hesta doesn’t say anything else. Then, quieter, “Just… stop looking for a story when there isn’t one.”

But there *is* a story. Branwen can now feel it in the way Hesta keeps taking less food at supper, or how she's been mending her boots, again and again, like she's preparing them for a road that doesn't exist.

Hesta doesn't argue anymore after that. Just rinses out the buckets and sets them upside-down on the wall to dry, leaving Branwen with her hands in grey water, blinking fast.

The hearth's long since gone cold, and the only light left is the bit of moon caught in the warped windowpane. Branwen lies stiff under the pelts, wide-eyed and hot-cheeked despite the chill, her fists clenched and pressed to her chest.

The bed feels strangely large without Hesta in it.

Her laughter had faded down the hall some time ago— into Mam and Pa's room, low voices murmuring in the hush. Whatever she's saying, Branwen can't hear it, and that makes it worse. Makes her burn. Makes her want to *scream* .

"Think you're too good for our bed now?" She whispers under her breath, face scrunching up, "Too old for your sisters?"

She nearly kicks the pelts off. Nearly tears at them with both hands. But instead she turns over sharply, buries herself deep under the wool and dogskin, shoulders hunched. Her nose smarts and her eyes sting, but she won't cry. She *won't* .

There is a soft rustle beside her. Then Meinwen's arm curls gently around her middle, not pulling, just resting.

“She’s not leaving *you,* you know,” Meinwen murmurs, breath warm against Branwen’s hair.

“She *is,* ” Branwen’s voice is thick, “You both are. Just— just going to run off and forget about me.”

Meinwen doesn’t sigh. She just waits, her cheek pressed to Branwen’s back.

“I don’t know what Hesta said,” She says at last, “but even if she does leave, that doesn’t mean we stop being your sisters. Doesn’t mean we stop loving you.”

“You’ll go too.”

Meinwen’s quiet a moment. Then, “Someday. Maybe.”

Branwen bunches her shoulders up tighter, “I just want us to stay. I *like* it here. I don’t care if the goats get sick and the orchard’s sour and we never have enough butter.”

“You will care, once you get a little older.”

Branwen huffs. She doesn’t believe her. She’ll *never* leave home. Can’t imagine ever sitting foot outside her village.

Then Meinwen adds, “You’ll have your tattoo, one day. And you’ll be

strong. Stronger than me, probably. Maybe stronger than Hesta."

"I *am* strong," Branwen mutters, voice muffled by the pelts.

"I know," Meinwen whispers.

They lie in silence after that, the creak of wind in the shutters the only sound. Branwen keeps her back turned, but after a while, she lets Meinwen's hand stay where it is.

The smell of porridge clings to the rafters, though it's thin again, barely more than water and oats, stretched with goat's milk. Their Mam's already out by the pen, fixing the north fence where the wind took it, and Pa moves between pot and hearth with a quiet, unreadable calm. The silence is usual. The stiffness is not.

Branwen perches on the bench, legs swinging under the table, cheeks puffed with the hot mouthful she hasn't swallowed yet. Meinwen eats slowly, stirring her spoon more than lifting it. Then Hesta walks in, hair still damp from the morning pump, cheeks ruddy with cold, and she's smiling. *Smiling* , like she's got a secret stitched into the seams of her shirt.

"Morning," She chirps, sitting down with a clatter of wooden bowl, "You'll be glad I'm gone soon. More food for the both of you."

Branwen blinks. Meinwen stiffens.

Pa doesn't say anything.

Branwen swallows too quickly and coughs, " *Gone* ?"

Hesta ladles herself some porridge, "Uh huh. I'm leaving next week. Llyncraig. Matron Esset needs a bookkeeper's apprentice and I've got my letters. Mam's taking me as far as the pass."

Meinwen's spoon slips into her bowl with a wet *plop,* "You're— *you're going to Llyncraig?* "

Branwen goes silent.

Hesta gives a shrug, too casual, "Someone's got to, don't they? There's nothing here for—"

"You *traitor* !" Branwen shrieks, bolting upright so fast her stool tips and clatters to the floor behind her.

Hesta's eyes go wide, her mouth still half-full of porridge, "Bran— what the—"

"We're supposed to *stay* ! You're supposed to *always stay!* " Branwen's voice cracks from the effort of yelling, from the betrayal splitting something open in her chest. Her fists are balled so tight they tremble at her sides, "We did the Tethering! I blessed the bloody rope!"

Hesta puts her spoon down slowly, "Branwen, don't be daft, no one actually believes in that—"

But Branwen's already lunging, swinging an empty wooden spoon like a sword, knocking Hesta's bowl clean from the table. Hot porridge splashes onto the floorboards. Meinwen starts to rise from her seat, but Pa reaches over and gently touches her wrist, "Let it happen," he murmurs. Meinwen frowns, but sits.

Hesta stands now, lips pressed tight, and pulls her braid over one shoulder, "I've *worked* for this, Bran. I've *earned* it. And I didn't know I'd be picked until two days ago."

"Earned it?" Branwen repeats, her voice trembling, "You mean *planned it.* Behind my back. Behind *our* backs."

"No one planned anything," Hesta says sharply, "It was a chance. A good one. The village matron's own clerk passed word to Mam and Pa. She remembered how I helped with tallies at the Fall Exchange, how I read her contracts when they came back from the city—"

Branwen makes a strangled sound, "No, you planned it! You've been planning to leave for— for a while now, haven't you?! Probably when you first started bleeding!"

Hesta throws her hands up, "Gods, Bran— I'm not a villain for taking a way out! For trying to find something better than goat shit and frost-rotted turnips!"

Branwen's eyes burn, and suddenly she's shaking— a fierce fire that feels too big to hold inside, "You think you're better than this? Better than *us?* " She wails, voice cracking, the heat of tears close behind.

"What? No, Bran, I'm not—"

“You *are!* ” She screams, voice rising until it feels like it might tear, “You think you’re too good to share our beds and eat the same thin gruel every night! You think the fancy books and city jobs will make you different!”

“I don’t care about books or fancy things!” Hesta shouts back, “I care about you not fucking starving!”

Branwen’s whole body trembles, every word like a hammer. She wants to shout louder, cry harder, but it’s all tangled into a knot of rage and heartbreak that won’t unwind. Branwen’s fists tremble, but she doesn’t strike. Instead, her voice becomes barely a whisper as she barely contains her fury, “But… but the Tethering— *We’ll stay. We’ll hold. The land will know our names.”*

Her chest tightens, and the weight of those words crashes down like a wave. Tears spill over before she can stop them. Her voice breaks, cracking under the strain, but nothing coherent comes out.

She stares at Hesta, eyes wide and pleading, but the hard edge in her sister’s gaze doesn’t soften. Branwen turns abruptly, the sobs choking her as she flees the room, the sound of her footsteps heavy and raw on the wooden floor. She runs until she reaches the goat pen. Branwen curls up low, her small hands clenched tight in the coarse hay. Her breath comes in shaky bursts, tears wetting the dirt beneath her. The soft murmurs of the goats and sheep surround her, all familiar sounds that somehow only deepen the ache inside.

Heavy footsteps approach, deliberate and steady. Her Mam’s boots scrape the gravel, her Pa’s softer steps following close behind. They don’t rush or speak at first, giving her space, but the silence grows too thick.

“Branwen,” Her Pa calls gently, her voice carrying both warmth and a quiet steel.

Branwen lifts her tear-streaked face, eyes red and wide. Her Mam kneels beside her, the lines of worry and weariness clear on her weathered face. Her hand, rough from years of toil, brushes stray strands of damp hair from her forehead, “It’s a hard thing, this,” she says, voice low but firm, “Changes come whether we want them or not.”

Her Pa’s eyes meet hers with a mixture of sadness and resolve, “We know your heart’s heavy. We all feel that weight. But you can’t hold the river back from running its course.”

Branwen’s voice cracks, “But I don’t want Hesta to leave. I want us to stay like we always have. Together.”

Mam’s gaze is steady and unwavering, “Families stick close in the heart, even when the roads take us apart. You’re stronger than you know. Harder, too.”

Her Pa squeezes her shoulder gently, “We won’t pretend it’s easy. You’ll have to carry some heavy days ahead. But you won’t carry them alone.”

The sounds of the animals settle into a gentle rhythm around them, the night stretching deep and cool. Branwen leans into her parents’ presence, the storm inside her quieting, even if just a little. The sharp sting of loss remains, but their hands hold steady, anchoring her to something stronger than fear.

And yet, despite her parent’s comfort, when Hesta says goodbye and tries to give Branwen a hug, she doesn’t return it. She remains bitter.

She gives her sister a hateful glare, and Hesta frowns deeply. She leaves in silence alongside Mam. Branwen, back then, wanted nothing more than her sister to feel shame, to feel something deep and unbearable.

She regrets not hugging back.

By contrast, Meinwen's eventual departure is… subdued.

Two springs have passed since Hesta left, and the farm's rhythm has settled into a new normal. Tonight, the dusk light pools low on the fields as Meinwen stands at the gate with her threadbare pack slung over her shoulder. She is older now— seventeen this year— and there's a quiet certainty in the set of her shoulders that wasn't there before.

Branwen, thirteen and still clutching the promise of the Tethering in her heart, storms down the path, skirts whipping at her knees. She stops just short of Meinwen and spits onto the earth. "You traitor," her voice is small but furious.

Meinwen's mouth tightens, but she says nothing at first. She lifts a hand and brushes a stray lock of hair back, the same motion she used when stitching leather in the orchard long ago, "I'm not leaving you," She murmurs, voice steady in the growing dark. "I'm only…" She glances back toward the low stone cottage, "I'm going because I have to."

Branwen's eyes burn with betrayal, "So Hesta leaving wasn't enough, then? What makes you think you'll make a difference?"

Meinwen's jaw tightens, but she holds Branwen's gaze steadily, "Because I can't stand still while everything we've built crumbles beneath our feet." Her voice softens, almost pleading, "I don't want to lose us all."

Branwen snorts, crossing her arms, but the words hang between them heavy and real.

Meinwen presses a hand to Branwen's arm, gentle but firm, "This farm will always be yours, Bran. I'll come back. I swear it."

Branwen pulls away, furious tears gleaming in her lashes, "I don't need your promises. And I don't want your pity! You couldn't— You're just itching to abandon us," She turns on her heel and storms back toward the barn, momentum carrying her past the faint light of the lanterns.

Behind her, Branwen stands in the yard, hands clenched at her sides, face set in stubborn resolve. In her heart, she knows the farm will endure because she will endure. And she *will* hold every promise, even the unspoken ones. And when her sisters' roads bring them back home, no matter how far or how long, they'll find her here, waiting, ready to tether them once more.

The dogs need walking. Cobble has died recently and she needs to be buried. The goats need deworming. The vegetable rows need turning. The land clings to Branwen in ways she didn't know how to shrug off. She's just— too busy to see Meinwen off later. The farm needs work and Branwen needs to pick up two people's jobs with her sisters gone. So she doesn't bid Meinwen farewell.

She will regret not watching Meinwen go, too.

But during that evening, she doesn't sit with her parents long by the hearth. There's a broken hinge on the goat pen that needs mending, and she sees to it before Mam can say a word. The next morning, she's up before the sun to clear muck from the sheep shed and scatter feed. By the end of the week, she's taken over every task that once rotated between all five of them— her sisters' chores folded into her own as if they'd never existed.

Her parents notice, of course. Mam tries to step in at first, waving her hand at Branwen as she hauls firewood across the yard, "You'll do your back in, Bran. And what good will you be to the goats then?"

"I'm fine," Branwen mutters, teeth gritted, sweat already soaking through the shoulders of her shift, "I can handle it."

Her Pa comes out of the barn later to find her elbow-deep in fence wire, bleeding from a shallow cut on her forearm. He crouches beside her, eyeing the damage with a worried frown.

"You're not a draft horse. You're one girl."

"Yeah?" She snaps, "Well, I'm the only one left."

He winces at that. But he doesn't say anything more— just takes the wire cutters from her hand, slow and quiet, and finishes the knot she was trying to twist. At night, her mother brushes straw from her hair and scolds her gently, "No one should fall asleep at the table."

But Branwen keeps pushing. Because if she stops, if she lets herself think about it, she might crumble. And someone needs to hold the line. She keeps convincing herself that her sisters will come back. That they'll see she's still here and feel terrible. They'll grovel for her forgiveness.

Her arms grow stronger. Her fingers crack and scar. She eventually forgets how empty the bed feels without her sisters. And when she looks out over the dry, stubborn rows of root vegetables that don't grow properly, she tells herself it's hers now.

The land will know her name.

The seasons turn, and the valley *ripens*. It has become… *better*. Just had Branwen hoped— *knew*. The snowmelt slows in the gullies, bees hum thick in the air, and Branwen throws herself into every inch of it.

She patches a neighbour's chicken coop with salvaged slats, shoulders the plough beside Mam when the mule tires, and learns by instinct when the sheep and goats are ready to birth. Her back burns under the sun. Her palms harden until she barely feels splinters. She hardly talks — except to the animals, who always listen.

But it's the hounds who listen best.

They've always been part of the village's rhythm, trained to scent out wildcats in the woods or run wolves off the ridgeline. Now, with her sisters gone, Branwen throws herself into working them. She wakes before the sun to run drills, her sharp whistle cutting through mist. They respond to her voice before it's fully steady, eyes on her like they know what she's asking even when she doesn't.

She adjusts the commands on her own, teaching one of the younger dogs— Fleet, a twitchy black-brown thing with too much leg— how to circle and drive without snapping at the lambs' heels. When Mam notices, she just nods once and goes back to sharpening her shears.

She hasn't needed to use her hound whistle much after Branwen took over dog duties. Mam's whistle lies on a nearby table, dented and unused.

Some days, Mam brings her along to trail wildcats. Not to confront, just to keep track of the animal's movement near the treeline. They don't talk much, Branwen's good at silence now, but the dogs stay close, breath steaming in the cold. She marks the prints in the mud. Memorizes the scent. She learns patience the way a dog does: ears up, heartbeat slow, waiting.

And at night, when the work's done and her arms are trembling from the weight of it all, it's a hound she curls against. Fleet lies draped over her legs under the dinner table, chin tucked on her foot like she's the safest place in the world.

No one tells her she's doing well. In Freehold, no one needs to. The hounds follow her now without question. That's praise enough.

One week, Branwen starts carving runes again— on fenceposts, on beams in the barn, even in the soft bark of the apple trees. Old charms and blessings for endurance. The gods of the valley *know* her, she decides. She's earned their attention. And when her sisters come back, she'll show them: She kept everything whole.

Sometimes, she dreams of them returning. Hesta taller and grander, Meinwen with her clever hands full of ribbon and news. They step into the yard and blink at how much stronger she's gotten, how she does the work of five. In the dream, they cry.

Branwen always wakes up before they speak.

The house is quieter now. Pa still hums when he churns butter, but it's a tired sound, one note held too long. Mam forgets to oil the gate hinges, and it screeches every time it swings.

On rare days when Mam finishes early, she coaxes Branwen to sit at the table and brush her hair. The strands are dry and sunbleached, and Mam tuts at the tangles, "You'll tear it all out if you keep hacking at it with that old comb."

"I don't care," Branwen mutters.

Mam sets down the brush and puts a hand on her shoulder, "I know."

Branwen doesn't pull away. But she doesn't lean in, either.

Then come the signs that the creek's running too high. That storm runoff has nowhere to go. But no one panics. The valley's seen worse before.

Branwen, for her part, just keeps working.

Because staying means safety.

Because staying is all she has left.

Branwen is sixteen and furious at the world.

The early summer rains have been long and heavy, and the lowlands are already weeping puddles. The creek nearby has turned mean, muddy and bloated, surging against its banks like a beast in a cage. The ground squelches underfoot. Fenceposts lean like they've given up. Even the hounds move more carefully.

The sky's been wrong for days— low and grey and tight, like it's holding its breath.

By the time the wind starts up, Branwen is already seething. One of the billy goats chews straight through the gate tie, two hens go missing before midday, and she tears her elbow clean through her only decent linen shirt trying to haul a lamb out from behind the feed barrel. Her braid is soaked, her boots are leaking again, and Pa has the nerve to *laugh* when she clomps into the kitchen dragging mud like a second cloak.

"The world's not out to get *you* in particular," He says, setting a pot on the stove.

"Could've fooled me," She mutters, yanking her cloak off the hook with more force than necessary.

The storm hits fast after supper.

Winds lash the valley like they've been waiting for their cue. Mam's

out back trying to save the washing, cursing as a shift tears loose and sails over the fence. Branwen scrambles after it, slipping once in the muck, and just manages to catch the sodden thing before it lands in the goat paddock. Fleet barks beside her.

“Leave it!” Mam shouts over the wind, “It’s gone!”

“Then why’d you yell?!”

“Habit!”

They’re both soaked in seconds. Branwen’s braid snaps across her face as she trudges back to her mother. Mam takes the garment with a sharp nod and turns toward the house, coat whipping around her calves.

“Pa’s doing the shutters— go help before the wind rips them right off!”

Branwen swears under her breath and circles the house, nearly losing a boot in the sucking mud. She finds Pa by the north wall, grunting as he fights the top latch while Fleet barks furiously at the sky.

“Need two hands!” He calls, “Hold it!”

She braces the shutter with her shoulder, teeth clenched against the cold, while Pa fastens the hook. The wind shoves at them like it means to knock them flat, but they get it done. The little house groans under the pressure.

“What about the goats and sheep?” She asks, panting.

“Paddock’s too slick to lead them in,” He says, “Your Mam and I’ve tied the gate. We’ll move them if the wind shifts.”

She doesn’t like that. The paddock lies low— too close to the creek.

“What about the feed barn?”

“We’ll check it now.”

They slog through the mud, boots sinking deep. Branwen keeps a hand on Fleet’s collar, and Pa whistles for the younger dogs to stay close. The barn’s holding, though the west door rattles ominously. They shove extra straw against the walls, tighten every hinge, and hope the roof doesn’t lift off in the night. By the time they return to the house, Mam has salvaged what she can of some herbs from the stoop. The yarrow’s limp and the mint is mostly stems, but she’s got a towel slung round her neck and her face set in that grim, determined way that Branwen has come to both admire and resent.

“Don’t just stand there gawping,” Mam snaps as Branwen lingers in the doorway, “Strip out of those wet things unless you’re itching for a fever.”

Branwen peels off her soaked overshirt and collapses onto the bench by the hearth, hair dripping and mood black as the sky. The fire barely holds. The house smells of damp wood and sharp soap.

She hates this weather. Hates how nothing stays dry, how the walls always leak at the corners, how the goats panic at thunder and chew

through the fences. Hates that the farm is always on the edge of breaking, no matter how hard they work or how a season might go well.

Hates that her sisters are still gone.

Fleet noses at her knee. She scratches behind her ears without thinking.

Mam brings over a mug of something bitter and hot, steeped mint and yarrow. Pa hands her a scrap of bread and a slice of pale cheese from the cupboard. It's not enough, but she takes it.

They don't say much. The wind speaks plenty for them.

Outside, the storm snarls. The hounds lie pressed close to the hearth. The house creaks and huddles under its weight.

And down in the dark, the creek suddenly swells.

There is no warning.

No crack of thunder, no eerie hush. Just a sudden roar— low and grinding, like a monster dragging itself through gravel— and then the ground shudders beneath their feet. Branwen jerks upright from where she's dozing beside the hearth. Fleet is already barking, sharp and frantic. The younger hounds are howling.

Pa's at the door in a flash. He throws it open, and wind punches

through the room, carrying the stench of mud and panic.

“ *Get up!* ” He bellows, “ *It’s out!* The creek’s out!”

Branwen scrambles to her feet, heart in her throat. Mam is already grabbing the satchel from the wall peg, the one they never use, the one with spare coin, binding thread, and all the papers the village steward gave them years ago when her parents first claimed the lease to the land. Branwen has never seen her reach for it before.

“Boots!” Mam snaps, “Branwen, boots, *now* !”

Outside, it’s a nightmare.

Water surges past the goat paddock, thick and brown and fast. The fenceposts are already gone. A bleating chorus rises from inside the barn. The lowest corner of the feed shed lists sideways, water clawing at its base. It’s not just them— Neighbours are shouting, lanterns bobbing like fireflies through the gloom. Somewhere further downhill, someone screams.

The flood doesn’t come like a wave. It comes like a wall that never stops moving.

Branwen’s fingers fumble with her boot laces. Fleet paces in tight circles, whining. Mam shoves open the shed and barks orders she can barely hear. The goats and sheep are stampeding inside their pens, eyes rolling white, hooves clattering. Branwen grabs the harness and tries to calm an old goat enough to lead.

“Leave the damned rake!” Mam snaps at Pa, who’s trying to drag tools

up the ladder to the hay loft, “ *Leave it— get the oil lamp!* ”

“I’ve got it!” He shouts, clambering down with soaked trousers and the look of a man who knows it’s already too late for most of what’s stored inside.

The water hits the edge of the barn floor. It’s fast, faster than any of them expect.

Branwen nearly slips as she tugs a nanny goat into the house yard. Her boots vanish in muck. A pair of hens skitter across the garden, wings flapping. One doesn’t make it. She watches it get taken, spinning like a broken toy in the flood.

“Mam, the dogs!” She cries.

Fleet is already herding the others toward higher ground, a rocky rise near the tree line behind the house. Smart dog. She knows.

“Go with them!” Mam yells, thrusting the satchel into Branwen’s arms, “ *Go, now!* ”

“I’m not—”

“ *Go!* ”

But she doesn’t.

She turns, stupidly, back toward the house as Pa re-emerges with a canvas bundle over his shoulder. It's the bedding, or what's left of it. His expression is tight and drawn, face grey with exhaustion and fear. Mam is already ankle-deep on the stoop, reaching for the latch again.

A plank from the shed roof floats past. Then a crate. Then another part of the fence.

Branwen's legs finally start moving. She doesn't even notice the sob caught in her throat until her vision blurs. Her coat bangs against her body as she wades toward the hounds, who are barking at her from the rise. She's still dragging an old goat by the harness, despite knowing the animal is worth nothing. Fleet's tail is low and stiff, body angled as if she's about to launch back into the water after her.

Behind her, the house groans again.

Pa is shouting something. Mam is yelling back.

Branwen slips once, her knee plunging deep into a rut of water and silt, and her fingers sting from the cold and the speed. When she hauls herself upright again, the goat brays and lurches ahead. Branwen lets it go, and the damn animal slips and falls, tumbling down.

Everything is loud. Everything is chaos.

The creek is no longer a creek. It's a river now— wide and wild, carving its way through every fence and garden, every corner of every life in the valley.

And their little farm, their patch of earth, is sinking. Branwen sees the

goat again, now floundering in the current, tangled in half a section of fencing. Her soaked coat drags her down. Her nostrils flare wide, and her bleats are hoarse, panicked, barely audible over the roar of water.

Branwen doesn't think. She just *moves* .

She splashes from the rise, stumbling down the mud-slick slope toward the barn, toward the thing she can *still* save. Fleet barks wildly behind her. The younger hounds yelp from the rocks, but she ignores them. The satchel is long gone. Her hair is plastered to her face, and her eyes sting. She reaches the goat at the edge of the flooded paddock. The water's up to her thighs now, and it's ice-cold. Her hands seize the rope still tied to the goat's halter.

"I've got you—hold on, I've *got you*— "

The fence lurches. So does the goat.

Then Pa is beside her, shouting her name, grabbing her by the shoulders. " *Let go!* You can't— Branwen, *let go!* "

"No! She's mine—she's—!"

" *Let her go!* " He roars, and in that second, the water shifts again—sudden and violent, as if the earth beneath it gave way.

A wall of debris comes down the slope. Logs, fenceposts, a shattered wheelbarrow— and in the middle of it, a cresting, curling wave, dark as pitch and screaming forward. Branwen barely sees Mam behind Pa, her arms stretched out as if she means to catch both of them. And Fleet— Fleet is still trying to circle back, barking like she can still stop

it.

“*Get up the rise!* ” Pa screams.

Then he shoves her.

Branwen hits the mud hard, skidding, her ears ringing.

She looks back just in time to see it hit.

A sickening *crack* of wood. The water takes Mam first, her arms still out, her face twisted in a soundless cry as she vanishes in the swell. Pa’s hand snatches at the fence, but it breaks clean off. Fleet leaps after them, paws striking water, and then she’s gone too.

The goat, the posts, Fleet and her parents— all torn away in one rush.

Just like that.

Branwen doesn’t scream.

She *wants* to. Her mouth opens. Her lungs seize. She wants to throw herself into the water, to go after them, to *do something* . Her body lurches forward. But her legs don’t move.

She’s frozen— knees sunk in mud, fingers gripping nothing. The cold has burrowed into her spine. Her jaw shakes. All she can do is stare as the flood eats everything else: the barn, the shed, the house, the fields.

The land is screaming.

And Branwen… she can’t even blink.

She stays like that for what feels like forever, soaked and shivering, the wind howling around her, until one of the younger hounds whines and noses at her side.

But Fleet doesn’t come.

And her parents don’t return.

This moment becomes a scar she never names, even to herself.

Now there is no cord. No family left to bind her. The land does not know her name— not anymore.

The flood leaves behind silence.

No funeral follows. No burial. There are no bodies to find. Her parents vanish as the water recedes, swallowed whole by the swollen creek and carried off into whatever beyond there is for people like them. What’s left of the house stands crooked. The garden is churned to muck. One goat survives. The dogs whine and pace and won’t leave her alone.

Neighbours come eventually, after the worst of it ebbs. They walk like ghosts, shoulders hunched against grief that they don't dare speak aloud. A woman from another farm lays a hand on Branwen's shoulder— just a moment, light as a falling leaf— and murmurs, "You poor thing."

Then the woman moves on. Her own roof has caved in.

Branwen says nothing. Her mouth won't work properly anymore. Her jaw is stiff and her throat feels splintered.

For three days, she does what she can.

Branwen hauls half-rotten wood from the barn's remains and tries to reset the fencing. She finds surviving chickens huddled beneath a half-toppled tool shed and coaxes them to a makeshift pen. She boils water on a borrowed stove and lights a barely rebuilt hearth using the driest scraps she can find.

She tells herself that if she just keeps moving, the silence won't catch her.

But by the fourth day, what's left of the root cellar smells sour and wrong. The hay has gone mouldy, and the chickens have scattered. The dogs are restless, taking turns staring at the road like they expect someone— *anyone* — to appear.

By the fifth day, Branwen understands what no one has said out loud.

There is no one coming.

Freeholds aren't prioritised. No noble house lays claim to their valley. No dues means no soldiers. No coin means no healers. No name means no rescue.

Branwen sits on the stone step and sharpens her belt knife until her fingers blister. She feeds the hounds the last of the dried marrow bones and watches the sky for signs. But the smoke from faraway chimneys is the only thing moving.

A hunk of drifted timber catches her foot, and when Branwen stoops to shove it aside, something small and pale gleams in the mud. She crouches, heart tightening. It's the hound whistle— Mam's old hound whistle— caked in silt, the leather thong split in two. The metal is bent, a shallow dent in one side, but she knows it instantly. She can almost hear the crooked note it used to make, that tea-kettle warble they'd teased her Mam about.

Her hands shake as she wipes it clean against her sleeve. The whistle feels too light, as if it shouldn't weigh anything without Mam's breath in it. She presses it to her lips, but no sound comes, just a rush of damp air and the faint taste of mud. Branwen stops and spends far too long cleaning it like it might bring them back. She blows it again and it makes a faint sound.

No one answers it.

So she— leaves.

Branwen doesn't tell anyone. Doesn't visit the neighbours. Doesn't carve a goodbye into a doorframe or scrawl her name in charcoal over the hearth.

She just packs what she can.

Half a sack of barley biscuits, flinty with age, a comb, and other small, probably useless things. The largest of the hounds left, a piebald bitch with a crooked leg, follows her to the edge of the trail. Branwen crouches. Scratches her ears and says, “ *Stay* ,” even though her voice trembles.

She walks anyway.

Sixteen. Hollow-eyed. She doesn’t look back.

She walks down the old logging trail until the trees close in, and the forest swallows the last of the village whole.

The following year is made of drift and hunger and blisters that split her heels. Branwen walks until her legs buckle, then walks more. Hunger gnaws like a rat in her belly. The first time she sleeps under a cart instead of in a bed, she tells herself it’s just for one night. But one night becomes a week. A week becomes a season. And soon she doesn’t bother telling herself anything at all.

She works where she can: stables, kennels, and smokehouses. Some jobs last a few weeks, others only a day. Towns blur. Roads blur. People forget her name if they ever learn it. She doesn’t correct them.

She sleeps in haylofts when the nights aren’t too cold, in the hollows of trees when they are. Sometimes, if she plays it right, a merchant lets her ride in the back of a cart, tucked between crates of apples or feed sacks. She learns to eat quietly, move quickly, and make herself

useful before anyone can ask who she belongs to.

The truth is: She belongs to no one. And in this new world, she quickly learns that that makes her prey.

Horses take to her. Dogs too. Even the mean ones. She has steady hands and a calm voice when needed, and animals know what kind of people don't flinch from storms. They know what grief smells like.

But people— people are a different matter.

Branwen learns what kind of person will knock over a girl just to feel taller. What kind of woman lets her own pain rot into cruelty. What kind of man likes having someone nearby who can't afford to talk back.

On the wrong side of sixteen, bone-sore and invisible, she *learns* it. Hatred like a stone in her gut. Not because bullies are cruel, though they are. Not because they lie or steal or strike. But because when you're small and poor and quiet, they get to *win* . Because there's nothing you can do but swallow it. Because sometimes you *don't* get to fight back.

She works for a kennelmaster outside a logging town once. A woman with thinning hair and a twisted cane she doesn't need, except for when she's striking stablehands across the backs of their knees. Branwen lasts three weeks. Makes herself indispensable mucking pens and teaching the young dogs not to bark at thunder. The dogs love her. Even the one with the crooked teeth and old burn scars lets her clean his ears.

But one day the woman comes home drunk from town and thinks Branwen didn't bow properly. The cane falls like a viper. Leaves a

welt across Branwen's ribs that blooms red and angry, a raised lash she has to cover for days. "Kneel," the woman says, and when Branwen doesn't, she shoves her down. She stays there because it's easier than being kicked, her knees grinding against the gritty planks. The woman makes her apologize for being rude, for wasting her time, for being clumsy, for breathing her air. Branwen says the words because if she doesn't, that cane will come across her head.

And inside, she burns.

She thought only nobles could look at a person and see nothing worth keeping. But here's a woman without two coins to rub together, drunk on the tiny power of having someone smaller to hurt. She's no better than the worst of them— maybe worse, because she knows exactly what it is to be hungry and still takes pleasure in starving someone else.

Branwen doesn't cry. Doesn't even flinch, not until she's alone. Then she wraps the ribs tight, packs what little she has, and slips out before the moon is high. Again. It's not the first time she's simply left a place, and it won't be the last.

Somewhere along the road, she fiddles with her Mam's hound whistle. She doesn't blow it. She just needs something to hold.

She later lands work on an aristocrat's estate one winter. A countess with teeth like sugar cubes and a fondness for hunting foxes in coats made from women's wages. Branwen brushes the horses. She doesn't speak. She learns the names of every hound in the kennel by heart.

But during frost season, the wind comes in like knives. Her fingers go stiff. Her breath frosts in her hair. She asks the stablemaster— quietly — for an extra blanket.

She laughs. Spits tobacco in the snow and says, “We don’t bother warming kindling. You’re replaceable.”

Replaceable.

That word brands itself into Branwen’s chest.

She thanks her anyway and doesn’t ask again. And when the frost season ends, she leaves before the lilacs bloom. She doesn’t keep in touch. She doesn’t look back. She doesn’t tell people her real name most of the time, if she tells them any name at all. It’s easier this way. Cleaner. Less to rip out of herself next time she has to go.

Not every place is bad. But the work never lasts.

Branwen dreams, sometimes, of the flood. Of the way her legs wouldn’t move. Of the farm, soaked and severed, pulled into the mud like it never mattered.

Of the goat.

Of Fleet.

Of her Pa’s voice shouting.

Of her Mam not even screaming when the waves took them all.

She doesn’t tell anyone these dreams.

No one asks.

She never cries.

Not when a red-faced baker cuffs her for eating crusts meant for the pigs. Not when she sees a girl her age sobbing in a doorway because her matron has turned her out, suitcase still packed with linens that don't belong to her. Not when her hand splits open on a rusted nail and the wound festers for days before it scabs.

Not even when she stumbles into a town square and sees Freeholders — her kind— strung up in stocks for stealing grain. Their feet blistered. Faces blistered worse. No one speaks to them. No one looks. Weakness is a luxury.

She hasn't been able to afford it since the creek rose.

Branwen keeps her head down. Works fast and eats little. Doesn't talk unless asked. Watches how people move, how hands twitch before anger, how voices change before someone decides they have the right to raise them.

Another winter, a minor noble hires her to muck stalls outside a border town. The house isn't grand, no marble floors or fountains, but it has a roofline that doesn't sag, and that alone makes it richer than anywhere Branwen's been in months. The air smells of beeswax and bay leaves instead of mud and smoke. She's here to help with the animals, same as always. Fewer blisters that way. Fewer people, too.

One afternoon, a steward's girl sets down a silver platter of fig tarts on the corner table by the stables. The pastry scent drifts warm and sweet through the open doors. Branwen glances at the girl, who's already walking away without a word. It feels strange— unearned. A… *gift?*

She hesitates, then slips one tart from the edge of the plate, holding it carefully so the flaky crust doesn't break. The figs are sticky and deep purple, the kind of food you only ever see on someone else's table. She takes a bite, sugar grit catching in her teeth.

It's the first real sweetness she's tasted since before the flood.

She's halfway through when the steward herself appears, eyes narrowing. There's no pause, no demand for explanation, just the sharp crack of a cane across the backs of Branwen's arms. The blow drives the tart from her hand, splattering across the packed dirt. Pain flares white-hot, stealing her breath. Before she can recover, the cane comes down again, and again, each strike finding new skin or breaking over the welt of the last.

By the fourth blow her arms are numb in places and searing in others, a deep ache settling under the skin. By the sixth, her fingers won't quite obey her, trembling uselessly.

"You don't touch what isn't yours," The woman says, voice flat as stone. Another strike.

Branwen grits her teeth. She wants to say she thought it was left there for the stablehands, that she hasn't stolen a thing in weeks. She wants to ask what harm a single tart could do. But she says nothing. She stands there, jaw locked so tight it aches. The fire in her arms burns deeper, radiating into her shoulders, sinking into the bone.

When the steward finally leaves, after making Branwen kneel and apologize, she can barely lift her arms enough to hold the stable door. The skin is mottled with raw welts already swelling, heat pouring off them in waves. Every movement— pulling a bucket, shifting a saddle — sends fresh sparks of pain up into her neck.

The sting blooms hot and throbbing along her forearms. She doesn't rub at it, won't give the woman the satisfaction.

Inside, though, something hardens even further.

It wasn't kindness. It was bait. A little trap to remind her of her place. And she's learned enough by now to know she'll never be allowed to forget it.

During one night, lying on the thin pallet in the tack room, Branwen keeps her arms tucked close, the welts pulsing with her heartbeat. She thinks about the taste of figs, about how quickly sweetness turns bitter.

She doesn't cry for that either.

Instead, she makes herself useful.

And when that isn't enough, she makes herself good.

And when *that* isn't enough, she learns how to make herself irreplaceable.

She gets up earlier than anyone else. Learns every dog's bark by sound

alone. Learns how to mend girths with one hand, how to move around colts who bite, how to sleep without ever fully sleeping.

It becomes a kind of vow. Another scar that runs too deep for names.

Because if she ever cries, if she ever lets go, then it might all spill out. The creek and the loss of everything.

So she doesn't.

She packs up and keeps walking.

It comes in the middle of a long walk between towns, somewhere along a road no one's bothered to name. The frost has finally lifted. She's been counting the days by how long the sun stays on her back.

At first, she thinks it's a wound. Branwen checks between her legs and curses, thinks maybe she scraped something climbing that stone fence back near the orchard. But no, she knows what this is. It's her first bleeding. She's known for years it would come. She just didn't think it would happen alone.

There should have been a gathering. Dye and a fire. Her Mam would've carved the first mark into her back, low and deliberate. Hesta would've teased her, Meinwen would've kissed her cheek after.

But there's no fire now. No hearth. No tattoo. No one. Her back is bare. Briefly, she wonders about how her sister's tattoos would look

now. She whispers once: *I would've gotten the same mark as them.*

Then she says nothing at all. What then lingers is the ache in her gut, and the stickiness between her thighs.

She makes do. Branwen rips linen into strips and knots them tight. She sits by a stream with her legs in the water, waiting for the cramps to pass. They don't. Her stomach clenches like a fist and won't let go. She's cold, filthy, aching, and alone. But her mind drifts, stupidly, to something Meinwen once said. That noble girls bleed *earlier.* Years earlier, at twelve or thirteen. Their bodies are quicker to change because they eat different things. Rich food. Clean water. Sugar, probably.

Branwen had scoffed at the time, but now… she clings to the thought like a thorn in her palm.

Of course they do , she thinks bitterly. *They're not like us. Not really. Soft things raised on white bread and rosehip jam, who've never mucked a stall in their lives.*

It's an absurd thing to dwell on, but it keeps her from noticing the slow trickle of blood between her legs. Keeps her from crying, which she refuses to do.

They're not the same. They never were. Nevermind the fact that commoners have shown themselves to be capable of equal cruelty, that doesn't matter. Branwen needs an enemy to latch onto and keep hating, if only to ground her in some way.

She doesn't know if that comforts or enrages her.

Maybe both.

Later that week, she's working a temporary post at a roadside stable. Nothing fancy, just feeding and brushing and walking the ponies. She sleeps in the hayloft, hounds curled up at her feet, her Mam's whistle looped around her wrist.

One morning, still sore and bleeding, she's leading out a dun mare when the strap on her pack tears and everything spills. The whistle falls and hits stone. Branwen sees it fall and moves to grab it.

The mare steps down before she can.

Crack.

The sound is sickening. Not loud, but final.

The carved wood splinters. The metal reed bends under the mare's weight, half-crushed into the dirt. When she lifts it, it's ruined. Split down the centre. Can't be blown and can't be fixed. Just like that, her Mam's whistle is gone.

Branwen just stands there.

She turns the whistle over in her palm. It's nothing now— just bits of carved wood, smeared with mud and horse dung and memory. She should bury it. She doesn't.

She doesn't cry.

She puts it back in her ripped pack anyway, wrapped in the same linen she's been using for her bleeding. Sits in the stable, shaking, hugging her knees. There's a smear of dried blood on her trousers and she doesn't care. No one says anything to her that day. No one notices the way she doesn't eat. The way she doesn't look anyone in the eye.

That night, she lies awake with the dogs tucked around her. The cramps are sharp again, like knives drawn low. She grits her teeth and presses her hand flat against her belly. It doesn't help.

She stares at the rafters. Imagines again the mark she'll never get on her back. The lines and whorls, bold and brown, carved into her back. Part of the bloodline. Part of the *place*.

But there's no place anymore. Just this. Just her.

Branwen doesn't cry.

She sleeps. And in the morning, she gets up and leaves again.

She drifts from place to place, never staying in one place for long.

The estate wasn't *yet* her home. Branwen had come to it sun-chapped and hollow-eyed, with a cracked heel bleeding through her boot and

the stink of a meat-wagon still clinging to her. She hadn't eaten since the morning before and she'd barely spoken in two days.

She didn't know who *The Lady* was, not exactly. Only that the woman owned a great deal of land, employed nearly a hundred staff, and— unlike most nobles— had a reputation for not striking her servants *much.* Branwen didn't know how many of the stories were true, but she knew the way staff at the last posting had looked at her when they whispered *"her estate's worth the trouble."*

So she'd shown up.

She is brought to the south paddock, where a small party of nobility, three women and one man, have dismounted after a brief ride. One of the women stands out immediately: Tall, dark-eyed, wearing a deep red riding cloak clasped with polished stone. Her gloves were off, and she was stroking the mane of a skittish mare with long, unhurried fingers.

Branwen doesn't know her name, but she knew she was in charge.

The stablehand who escorted her— old, wrinkled, and not unsympathetic— speaks of her aloud with a hint of hesitation, "This one here said she can train a dog or horse faster'n any soldier. Might be useful in the kennels, or with the coursers."

The woman in red looks her over without flinching.

"Name?"

"Branwen. From a Freehold village, so no last name or fancy titles."

“ Age?”

“Eighteen.”

There is a faint snort from one of the other women, who wears ivory gloves and too many pearls for a country visit, “Gods. What are they naming girls in the Freeholds these days?”

Branwen stiffens.

The woman in red doesn't look away from her. She only says, calmly, “And what are you doing this far south, Branwen of the Freeholds?”

Branwen doesn’t pretend, nor does she beg. She merely tells the truth.

“My parents died in a flood,” she says flatly, “It destroyed our farm. I’ve worked stables and courier posts since. I can ride, muck, break and bridle. I don’t cry and I don’t drink unless someone else is buying.”

There is a brief silence.

The pearl-gloved woman murmurs, “Well. That’s a story, isn’t it?”

But the woman in red doesn’t flinch. Instead, her lips twitches upward — almost, *almost* a smile. “Good. Let’s see your hands, then.”

Branwen shows them. Blistered, and calloused. Scarred from splinters.

The woman turns, “Bring the hound.”

The stablehand blanches, “Madam, I— he’s not quite trained. Still snappish, with strangers—”

“That’s the point.”

The brindle hound is brought out by two handlers gripping a doubled lead. It’s an ugly beast by estate standards. It’s large, unkempt, with a face more like a Mirewolf than a coursing dog. Scars run from brow to jowl, and its hackles rise like a ridge of broken bristles as it catches Branwen’s scent.

“He was a rescue,” Says the pearl-gloved noblewoman with faint distaste. “Why he hasn’t been put down yet is beyond me.”

The hound lunges once, teeth flashing, and the handlers yank back hard. It yelps, more enraged than deterred. Branwen doesn’t blink. She steps off the gravel walk and into the sun-bleached grass, her movements slow and even, eyes never meeting the hound’s directly. He’d take that as a threat.

She stops three paces away.

The dog snarls, low in its throat. The handlers mutter swears.

“Let go,” Branwen says.

They stare at her.

“Let. Go.”

One of them hesitates, “He’ll take your arm off.”

“Then you’ll know I’m lying about being good with animals.”

A pause. Then, reluctantly, the lead is unclipped.

The hound doesn’t charge straight in. He arcs to the side in a tight half-circle, tail low and stiff, eyes fixed. He’s testing her, like wild dogs do— looking for tension, weakness, and the smallest twitch that says prey.

Branwen lowers herself into a squat. Her hands stay open and loose at her sides. Her eyes slide away from his. She makes a sound. It’s low and almost inaudible. Not a word, but a deep throat-click she once used for goat mothers during kidding season. Mam taught her that. Let them know you’re just another creature.

The dog barks once, short and sharp.

Another click.

He edges closer this time, head low, ears angled back.

Closer.

Another click.

Branwen turns one hand palm-up, giving a low whistle and resting her hand in the grass. He sniffs, snorts, shifts his weight. Then— unexpectedly— he licks once between her fingers and drops onto his belly in front of her, chest pressed flat to the dirt.

She doesn't smile. Doesn't look proud. She simply raises a hand and scratches the thick fur behind his ear with her knuckles. Fingertips are too forward but knuckles say, *we're equals.*

The hound breathes deep, eyes closing briefly, as though the tension in his body is draining into the ground.

"You see that?" One of the handlers whispers. "Didn't even flinch."

The woman in red, chin resting on a gloved knuckle, finally speaks, "He was feral last week. Attacked the kennelmaster."

Branwen grunts quietly.

"Did you train him?"

"No," Branwen says, voice flat, "Proper training would take weeks, if not months. I just listened to him."

The noblewoman's lips curve faintly, "Same thing, in the end."

One of the other nobles mutters something about kennel girls and theatrical displays, but Branwen either doesn't hear or chooses not to. The brindle hound huffs into her lap, his massive head heavy on her thigh. She scratches under his chin, slow and steady.

"Would you care to name him?" The Lady asks idly.

"No," Branwen says, and doesn't elaborate further. She doesn't name any of the animals in her care. The only reason her personal mare that she'll receive years later, Rilke, even has a name is because The Lady gave it to her. Said it sounded *Freehold-ish.*

The dog yawns wide, teeth flashing white against the scars on his face.

And with that, the matter is settled.

Branwen doesn't learn until much later that she'd spoken to Lady Mirelda Amaranthe herself. That the woman who'd offered her work with the same ease someone might order tea was worth more than all the flooded farmland Branwen had lost ten times over.

But she *did* know, even then, that she'd just crossed into a place she couldn't afford to leave.

And if the woman pays on time, doesn't hit, and let her work with animals— Branwen would claw her way into being irreplaceable.

Before the flood, the world was small.

It is hills and fences, dirt paths and the cries of goats. The white paint flakes from the barn door. Lambing season beats a rhythm she knows by heart. The stubborn creek sometimes floods the east field, but never worse than a boot-soak. Her Mam's hands rest on her shoulders. Her father's barked laugh echoes at dusk. Wet wool and woodsmoke cling to her hair.

The world is— was her family, her farm, her village. That was enough. It is all she needed. All she expected.

Then the waters rose, and they did not stop. When they fell again, her world vanished with them.

After that, the world kept growing.

First, it had grown into the next village. Then the towns she drifted through. Then the city that stinks of too many chimneys. It grew again with unfamiliar dialects, again when she learned to duck at a raised voice. It expanded each time someone tells her she is lucky to have this job, each time she did not eat so the dog can, each time she slept in hay and called it comfort.

Now in her twenties, the world becomes enormous. It stretches across hills, over mountains, past rivers, into cities she will never see, ports she cannot imagine, and further still into colonies she only reads about in The Lady's paper. Names that sound made up. Places with sugar fields and pink salt, warfronts, trade bans, so-called civilising projects she does not understand.

She hears whispers of officers gone native, governors recalled, grooms married off like treaties. She overhears some of The Lady's guests discussing a nephew shipped off to wed a spice-baroness's daughter in a place Branwen cannot place on a map.

She does not know what to call the feeling in her gut when she thinks about it. When she reads the words in ink, when she hears the hum of politics, something that is and is not about her all at once.

It is not fear. Not anger.

More like the edge-of-a-cliff feeling. Something that makes her chest ache. Wondering, suddenly, what would happen if she stepped forward instead of back.

The world is too big for me.

That is the closest she can name it.

Too big. And she no longer knows where her place is. She is irreplaceable here, yes— on this estate, in these stables and among the hounds and horses— but she does not belong in the ways that matter to the people who rule it. Never has.

So she mucks stalls. She runs hounds. She keeps her boots firm on the ground and tries not to think about maps and treaties, about the way The Lady pronounces The Peninsula like a proper noun, as if any piece of earth ever really belongs to anyone.

She tries not to think at all.

Except she thinks about it all the time.

When a paper lies open on the table, folded to a headline about unrest or marriage alliances or charter expansions, Branwen does not read it. She folds it up, sets it aside. The world can stay big. She will stay where her boots fit.

But later, she almost feels compelled to read it anyway. She flips it over and feels the strange dread that comes with it. She thinks about it too much, reads about it too often.

It must be three— or maybe four— winters after Branwen claws her way onto the estate payroll, still half-feral with cold and suspicion, barely speaking unless asked. She has earned a reputation as the woman who can break wild mares and temper blood-crazed hounds, but she rarely looks anyone in the eye unless they have hooves or fangs.

One morning, long before the sun drags itself above the frost, Branwen passes through the servants' courtyard on her way to check a foaling mare. Her breath comes out like smoke. Her boots crunch on salt-dusted stone.

That's when she sees him.

A boy, a thin one, kneels beside the cistern with a cracked tin bucket. She would not have looked twice if not for the care in his movements, like he is trying not to wake the air. Brown hair, too big a coat. His hands shake, either from cold or nerves, she cannot tell, and when someone calls from the washroom entrance, he flinches so hard he nearly drops the bucket.

Branwen slows just a little, enough to glance. Not out of concern— at least, that is what she tells herself— but curiosity. He is new, maybe. Or just unnoticeable. A house-launderer, she guesses. Quiet types like that do not last long.

He does not see her watching. He mutters something she cannot hear and scurries off like a shadow with legs. Branwen does not think about him again. Not for years. She has horses to break, teeth to dodge, the slow, endless work of making herself useful enough to stay fed. The estate has dozens of staff, most of them interchangeable.

And he seems… ordinary. Small. Forgettable. She never hears him speak, but she is sure his voice is barely a ripple in the air, his presence barely discernible.

Funny how the world works.

Now, she would recognise that coat, that nervous gait, even in the dark. Would feel compelled to defend him, for reasons she can't fathom or understand.

But back then?

Back then, he is just a boy with a bucket.

And she is just a woman with no time for softness.

Chapter End Notes

Me? Spending too much time and words on a tragic backstory? Never.

Chapter 5

The stonework still holds the chill of winter, despite it now being mid-spring. Even with the sun out and the frost gone from the hedgerows, the Eastern Dominions never *quite* warm. The air in the estate corridors always smells faintly of old smoke and wet linen.

Jonas is cleaning the hearth in the west reading parlour, a rarely used room on the ground floor, wood-panelled and formal, with thick velvet drapes no one's opened in years. The kind of room noblewomen like to "forget" exists until it's needed for guests or posturing. He kneels on the stone, hair curling damply at his brow. One of his hands is blackened from the soot pan. The brass andirons squeak as he shifts them.

He's just swept a half-burnt log onto the grate when something in the soot *moves* .

No sound. Just a twitch— *like a blink.*

Jonas freezes. His heart does a slow, traitorous turn and a tremble climbs up from his belly.

He squints. *There it is again.*

It's not movement, exactly. More like... a suggestion. A *knowing* . The faintest *tick* in his mind, like someone behind his eyes had just closed them for him. He blinks back, once, then again— more desperate now — as if he might have imagined it. But it's *there* , buried in the soot, just to the left of the grate: Another flicker, another twitch. Like the fire itself had eyes and decided to shut them for a moment.

Jonas's breath catches.

The…. The Blinker…!!

Potentially malevolent folk, depending on its mood. Said to live in ash and smoke, and only ever seen out the corner of the eye, never directly. It waits and watches. Sometimes moves your things. Sometimes lets the fire go out no matter how much coal you feed it. If you see it blink, that means it *knows* your name, and it'll blink *inside* of you.

"They like the lonely ones. The quiet boys. The ones who don't ask for much," His grandmother had said once.

His mouth goes dry.

He dares a glance over his shoulder. No one. No Branwen stomping in like a knight in mud encrusted armour, no Maud barking for the sweepings, and no higher ranked steward asking if The Lady's parlour is presentable. Just the ticking of the longcase clock by the wall and the soft hiss of spring wind through the stone seams.

Jonas leans forward, very slowly, to retrieve the brush.

Then the blinking happens again.

He stifles a squeak and *scrambles* back, so fast he knocks into the bucket of cold ash behind him. It tips, scatters, coats his trousers and

knees in grey. He doesn't care— But *oh,* that's a mess he needs to clean before he can flee.

Jonas finishes the sweeping with tight, clumsy movements, keeping his head turned slightly, never looking *directly* into the ash again. He folds the kindling in awkwardly and strains his ears in case he might hear the Blinker leave the fireplace and edge towards him. It's a thought that makes a prickly sensation travel down the back of his neck.

By the time the room is tidy, his palms are grey and his collar's been pulled crooked from the number of times he's twisted around. Jonas doesn't check his work. He snatches up the ash bucket and brush and *flees*— down the corridor and around the corner. He doesn't slow until the walls stop echoing like whispers.

It's quiet. Blessedly, for once.

The horses are out to pasture. Most of the hounds have been taken out by the younger stablehands to run the forest trails and scent markers. Just one remains behind, who's curled up beside Branwen's bench with a linen-wrapped paw and a look that says she's owed every bit of this comfort. Idiot stepped on one too many thorns.

Branwen leans back on the hay-stuffed bench outside the tack room, her legs stretched out in the filtered sun with ankles crossed. She's stripped down to her shirtsleeves, the hard morning work still clinging to her forearms in a fine dust of sweat and feed-chaff. But for now, there's a breeze. The kind that carries the scent of pine and spring earth.

It’s not often she gets a moment like this. Her boots are untied and her hair is down. Her calloused fingers are working idly at a leather strap in need of re-oiling. She’d been meaning to get up, and maybe do something with the jam tart she has leftover. If she timed it right, she might even sneak it and stash it near the servant dormitories— somewhere Jonas would find it and think it’d fallen there by divine accident.

He still looks at her like she was some spirit envoy, some silent mythic figure from the fields. It’s absurd. She’s not entirely sure why she’s still playing the role.

Well, no. She knows exactly why.

Because he helped her. That day the storm rolled in so fast she hadn’t even seen the dogs to shelter yet. The sky turning to iron, thunder in her throat. Her hands shaking and her body rooted like stone in the yard, rain lashing her face— but all she could see was water rising again, sodden wood and hearing a goat's final bleat. She hadn’t moved, not until Jonas came.

He’d spoken softly, touched her shoulder, and just guided her back inside like she was a horse too spooked to rein in. He didn’t know why she was like that and she intends to keep it that way.

But she remembers. That day and the warmth of his hand through her shirt. The way he’d hovered awkwardly after with only half his words in working order and then got spooked by her godsdamned whistling of all things. Easy to scare, that one. Not necessarily a bad thing, and it’s not like she *likes* seeing him scared, but she also can’t deny the wry amusement she felt looking at him. How, for a moment, she forgot the flood.

Branwen’s gaze lands again on the tart she’d been half-distractedly

eyeing on the windowsill across the stable corridor. Syrupy, too red to be natural, the filling has melted a little. She squints at it, already imagining Jonas's baffled joy, when—

She bites her inner cheek.

She resents that softness in herself. Hates how easily it can be stirred. How him cleaning up the place, sometimes brushing horses under her invitation, watching his shoulders hunch when the nobles bark too loud, seeing the way he fusses over bloody shortbread— how *that* has started to dig under her ribs.

Actually, maybe she should stop playing the part, this is stupid—

There's a hump, followed by a skid and a flurry of footsteps.

Branwen looks up just in time to see Jonas burst in through the side door, hair sticking up on one side, breath uneven, and ash smeared on one wrist and over his clothing. He skids to a halt— actually *halts*— at the edge of the doorway. One foot hovers above the threshold's shadow. He stares at the line of it, blinking rapidly, and then carefully steps around it.

Branwen doesn't move. Just raises an eyebrow. The hound beside her lifts her head, then decides it's not worth the effort and lays back down.

Jonas, wide-eyed and still panting a little, clutches an empty ash bucket like it's a holy relic.

"F-f-fireplace d-d-didn't like m-me t-t-today," He blurts. He looks at

her for about a half a second before seemingly choking on nothing and quickly averting his gaze. He swivels his head so quickly that branwen thinks he might snap his head.

Branwen brow goes higher, “...That so?”

“Th-the… th-th-there w-w-was a th-thing. In th-the ch-chimney.”

“A thing?”

“A-a b-bl-bl-blink— I-I-I saw it. It—it—”

He drops the ash bucket and waves his hands in the air, miming something between a flutter and an explosion. It looks vaguely like a puff of smoke having a nervous breakdown. His hands flap a few more times, then he drops them, shoulders caving in defeat.

Branwen exhales, sharper than she means to, “Slow down.”

Why does she bother? She could tell him to get out and stop spilling nonsense in her doorway. But no, there she is, steadying him like she’s his anchor. Idiot woman.

He gulps, nods, and pulls in a breath.

“Th-th-the B-blinker,” He says finally.

Branwen squints, “That a kind of crow? Sounds like a crow.”

Jonas shakes his head so fiercely his curls flop into his eyes, “It l-l-l-lives in… in f-firep-p-places. W-watching.”

She leans back again, trying not to smirk, “Watches what? Dust?”

His expression tightens. Not embarrassed, exactly, but serious, like he *wants* to believe she’ll understand if he can just explain it right. She doesn’t laugh, though. Something tells her he wouldn’t appreciate that this time. And she knows— damn her— that mocking him now would feel cruel.

Fool. Weak-hearted fool. She should cut this off.

Branwen stretches out one leg and then she pats the bench beside her, “Sit. You look like you’ve seen a ghost again,” And there it is. The softness. She tries to ignore how much it irritates her.

He hesitates. Then obeys. He looks like he’s expecting a shadow to growl at him. He sits stiffly beside the hound bed, fingers tight around his knees, and keeps glancing over his shoulder— as if the thing might’ve followed him.

The hound snuffles once, snorts, and lets Jonas sit without complaint.

“All right,” Branwen says, as if this is normal, as if she hasn’t just given in to her own foolish streak, “Explain this Blinker thing to me.”

Jonas gulps, then tries. The words come slower now, like he’s fishing them from a too-deep well.

“It’s—i-it’s a f-f-fair folk. But sh-shy. It b-b-b-blinks at y-you. That’s how you kn-kn-know it’s there,” He makes the hand motion again, a fluttery little pop, like a fish breaching the surface of a pond and vanishing just as quick, “Only… y-you’re not s-supposed to l-look too long. Or—” He gestures vaguely to the side of his head, “—It r-remembers you. A-a-and next time you’re a-alone…”

“Next time what?”

Jonas goes very still, “It… b-blinks i-i-inside yo—you.”

That prickle at her neck again. Damn him. Damn her for listening. She blinks at *him* , “...Did everyone where you’re from believe in that?”

His ears flush, “W-we… we had diff-rent st-stories. And—n-not everyone, just—just my g-gran told it t-to us.”

Branwen grunts, sits back, and tosses a small stick for the hound to lazily bat with her uninjured paw, “Freeholders never had that one. Mostly ghosts and river curses. ‘Course, we had the Whistler, too,” She cuts him a side look, a smirk tugging at her mouth despite her scolding herself for it.

Jonas huffs, red-faced.

“So, what, it blinks *into* you?”

Jonas’s lips press together. He nods solemnly, “J-j-just a b-bl-blink,

and y-you're… n-not the same."

"You're telling me something is going to *possess* you through eye contact."

Jonas's face grows redder and she almost starts to feel bad, "W-we di–didn't really q-q-question it."

"Right."

Branwen sighs and pushes off her stool, "I'll go check it out," Branwen rolls her shoulder, feeling the familiar pull where the cane scars cut shallow beneath the skin. Another reminder. She's no one's nursemaid, no one's fool. And yet— When Jonas glances at her, she sees it— a hint of guilt in those big eyes of his, almost. She grunts, "Fair folk, ghosts, same difference. You can toss a boot at either and they'll usually bugger off."

His mouth opens like he might protest, but then just nods, grateful in the way only he manages and without saying a word. She doesn't know what's worse: Jonas's half-baked superstitions, or how earnest he is about them. Probably the latter. It makes her stomach twist.

And that's the trouble.

She doesn't want to feel… anything like this. Affection, even the dumb, half-wary kind. Not for someone so bloody skittish. Not for someone who still pauses in doorways to avoid stepping through shadows and looks at her like she's nobility wrapped in mud.

But there he is, again, breathless and trying to tell her about chimney

spirits. Sitting beside her like it's the most natural thing in the world. He's become something of a fixture, in such a short time. Like the whistle she used to carry. Like the notch on her belt from her Mam's knife.

She jerks her chin toward the dog, "You stay here. Keep an eye on her paw. Someone's got to mind her. Besides, fair folk hate witnesses," She doesn't actually know that, but judging by how Jonas stiffens she's hit the nail on the head. He makes a faint noise in his throat like he wants to argue but can't quite find the breath.

Branwen ruffles the hound's ears as she passes, "If anything *does* blink, throw him at it," She tells the dog, who gives a half-hearted thump.

Jonas doesn't laugh, but the corner of his mouth twitches, "B-b-be car —careful."

She merely waves him off. She's not getting soft. She's just making sure he doesn't wind himself up and start neglecting his kennel and stable duties. It wouldn't do to have him half scared to death all the time. That's *it*.

Branwen leaves the stables and kennels through a different exit, and discreetly moves the tart from the windowsill to somewhere out of sight.

Branwen isn't one for the main house. She rarely gets inside, unless she's having a meeting with The Lady.

The air always smells too much like boiled linen and floral soap, like

someone trying to scrub the earth off the world. The floors creak in places where they shouldn't, like the house itself is whispering secrets behind your back. And there are *so many* curtains. Billowy, *ghost-like* things that hover in doorways and brush your arms when you're not looking. No wonder Jonas always looks like he's about to jump out of his skin.

She prefers hay and horse sweat and the steady rhythm of hound paws on stone. Give her a barn with a cracked beam over a parlour with a chandelier any day. Which is why, when she strides past the servants' corridor that afternoon, still wind-mussed and a bit ruddy from the earlier yard work, hands planted on her hips like she owns the place, more than a few heads turn.

Maud peers at her from down the hall, elbow-deep in the silver polish bin.

"You're lost," She says, dry as dust.

Branwen grunts, "I'm on a reconnaissance mission."

"Gods help us."

She asks around with all the subtlety of a hound nosing through a chicken coop. Apparently, some of the stewards have seen it too. A flicker in the flue. An oily kind of blink, just above the firewood. Though they have a different kind of story for it, another ghost story and no fair folk.

One claims it only shows up in homes with unmarried men still living under the roof.

“Or lads who *should’ve* left ages ago,” One adds, with a pointed look toward a passing kitchen boy.

“It’s the spirit of a spurned matron,” Another says, all dramatic relish, “She never got her cloak washed or her supper hot. Died bitter. Now she haunts the hearth, blinking at those who deserve a slipper to the head.”

Branwen rolls her eyes. Jonas may be the jumpy type, but it’s no use having other servants lose sleep over stupid ghost stories. She’s doing Maud a favour by putting this to rest. No more, no less.

“Fool boy,” She mutters, “You’ve let shadows spook you.”

Later that hour, she crouches before the fireplace with an old scarf looped over her nose and mouth, poking at the flue with a fire poker. It stinks of soot and damp bricks. Smoke stains the back of her knuckles. She’s brought a bucket of water, just in case something *does* come screeching out. She’s dealt with worse. Once pulled a mad crow from a chimney on the east trail, wings half-burnt and shrieking like a dying prophet.

This, though?

A rustle. Then a flick of movement.

She squints.

And suddenly— *fwump*— a flurry of fur spills down in a soot-dusted panic. A small, fat chimbletail tumbles out of the flue like a guilty toddler caught in the pantry. It skitters sideways, knocking over

kindling, then vanishes behind a chair in the corner.

Branwen stares after it, scarf slipping down past her chin.

"…Oh, for piss's sake."

She brushes soot off her hands and wipes her forehead with the back of her wrist, smudging ash across her temple.

Jonas is going to *want* to believe it's still some blinking spirit. But at least now she has proof. And maybe, if she's feeling generous, she'll let him keep the story. Maybe she'll even tell it *with* him. With the same wide-eyed hush, just to see his face.

…She probably won't do that.

But first, she has a squirrel to chase.

Jonas now sits cross-legged beside the hound, scratching her ears while she's curled tight on her bed made of straw. For the first time since he sprinted across the courtyard in a chimney-induced fright, his heart is no longer hammering.

Mostly.

Branwen is doing something for him. *Again.*

He scratches the back of his neck. There it is— the guilt, creeping in like rising damp. She's never cut him off or made him feel quite as silly as he should. But it feels lopsided somehow. Unfair. She's always doing the braver thing, the real thing, while he sits and frets like a—

No. No, *he* was the one who got her out of that storm, wasn't he? She'd been stuck, frozen in the rain and he'd… done something. Reached her. Brought her back inside.

He *knows* that happened.

Still doesn't feel like it matters. Not really.

Because when he thinks of her, it's not that sodden moment by a gate that comes to mind, it's her whistling the hounds to silence, brushing the horses, her standing between him and cruel words, and now her walking into chimneys as if ghosts were no more dangerous than squirrels.

And what had he done for her? Failed to bake a spiced honey-cake.

No, she was the one who did things that *mattered* .

Maybe that's why he keeps seeing her through a half-glass of something older, some half-folk tale bent by belief. A guardian. A whisper in the wheatfields. Not *just* a woman with calloused hands and a no-nonsense scowl. She *must've* been sent. Somehow. Why else would she be here? It is the only thing that made sense.

Because no one… *no one* tried this hard for him, unless they'd been touched by something beyond the ordinary.

And it wasn't like he'd ever say any of that aloud. He just sat with the thought, quiet and odd and weighty, and let it nest inside his chest like a strange little bird.

He glances toward the barn doors, uncertain. Maybe he ought to return to the house. The polishing's not going to finish itself. Maud would already be muttering about him, he's sure of it.

But his feet don't move.

Maybe, instead, he could clean the kennel troughs again. They don't *need* it, exactly, he'd already done it yesterday, but keeping his hands busy always helped settle his mind.

He's just standing when the hound shifts, stretching out with a grunt. Her paw catches the edge of an old oil lantern someone had left on a stool nearby. It teeters.

"W-wait—!"

Oil splatters. The lamp goes down hard against a timber leg. For one awful second, nothing happens.

Then—

A thin ribbon of fire licks along the spilled oil. It jumps from the wood to the edge of a hay bale like it's hungry. Within heartbeats, the

flame’s grown teeth. Jonas stares, but not for long.

The hound lets out a sharp, anxious yip and scrambles backward, dragging her bad leg. That snaps him into motion.

Jonas lunges for the old water bucket by the tack wall and slams his shin against a bench on the way, *“ah—!”* but he still manages to grab it. It's barely half-full. He throws it anyway, water sloshing out in a messy arc. It catches the edge of the fire, *hisses* , but doesn’t kill it. A steam-burst curls toward his face. Panic claws up his throat.

“Hhh-help—!” But there's no one. His voice dies in the rafters.

He spins, grabs the nearest thing— his overshirt. Shrugs it off in one desperate jerk, buttons flying, and uses it to beat at the flames. Again. And again. The hay sizzles and smokes and flattens under each blow. The flames shrink. Fight back. Then shrink again. Smoke churns thick and sharp, setting his eyes to watering. He coughs hard but keeps going.

One last blow, and the last of the small fire gives out, collapsing in on itself with a smoulder. Blackened hay and a scorch mark remain. Jonas stands there, shirt soaked in ash and soot and oily residue, breathing hard. His hands tremble.

He stares at where the flames had been. Then down at his ruined overshirt. The hem is scorched clean through in places. The sleeves are soaked and muddy. One side’s torn from when he’d yanked it too fast. His wool token is ruined.

But there’s no fire. He silently thanks his mother’s red thread for surely preventing it from being worse.

“…G-good,” He whispers hoarsely, “Th-that’s… th-that’s g-g-good then.”

He doesn’t move yet.

Just stays there, smoke curling faintly in the air, and the dog at his side watching him with one ear cocked.

The chimbletail leads her on a merry chase through the parlour corridor, streaking under tables and over a chaise like a soot-slicked arrow. It finally makes the mistake of darting into another tearoom, where she traps it under a washbasin lid and scoops it, hissing and wriggling, into a birdcage she swiped from a forgotten sunroom shelf.

It clings to the bars, tail twitching with defiant dignity. She squints at it, “You’re lucky I’m not siccing the hounds on you.”

She almost chuckles. The whole thing’s absurd.

Branwen stands, brushing her hands off on her trousers, and catches sight of the books.

They’re laid out like a still life on the reading bench— open, spines bent, a teacup stain ghosting on one of the pages. The Lady’s daughters or some other guest must’ve left them behind again. She remembers seeing the youngest flip through them days earlier, listless and distracted, as if she were playing with cards rather than absorbing

a single word.

Branwen approaches without thinking. The spines are dyed in strange hues, a soft teal, lacquered red, with a pearl-coloured binding that glints faintly with metallic ink. The script doesn't look like any she's been taught. Not the even loops of Dominion Standard, nor the sharp ticks of tally marks she learned to copy in the estate's ledger room.

Some scripts curl and twist like vines, looping back into themselves like knotted grass. Another book has a painted map on its cover: seas spiralling like whorls in woodgrain, land masses painted in shifting hues, no borders, only place-names inked in calligraphy that bleeds slightly at the corners. Her fingers hover over the map.

One name jumps out: *Qhessa-daranath.* Red ink. Nestled beneath a range of dark, scalloped mountains.

She doesn't know where Qhessa-daranath is. It hasn't come up in the newsprint she squints over. It's never passed the lips of the noblewomen who chatter on horseback about tariffs, sugar routes, or the price of imports from the Summer Coast. Maybe it's myth. Or maybe it's real and vast and aching with sun, and she simply wasn't taught to care.

Her hand grazes the map's edge. Then she pulls back.

Another book lies beside it, cracked open at a dog-eared page. The script in this one is easier since it's Dominion Standard, mostly. Someone's underlined a passage in faint pencil. The words describe a series of *"unrestful provinces"* along a floodplain delta. A revolt flared there last spring, fisherwomen and low-titled sisters rebelling against new land taxes and the removal of ancestral burial sites.

The account is dry. Detached. A footnote adds that a new governor—second daughter to a Matron of the Grand Assembly— was dispatched to *restore order* and *stabilize the culture* . The region is described as *"hot, wet, overgrown,"* and *“well-suited to young administrators in need of discipline.”*

Branwen closes the book with more care than it deserves.

She stands in the centre of the parlour, soot on her shirt and a squirrel in a birdcage at her feet, and the hush of the estate presses around her like heavy wool.

Right. She feels small again. Being inside of the main house… Always makes her feel that way. Branwen exhales and picks up the cage.

"Come on, you little bastard," She mutters to the chimbletail, who chitters at her in outrage.

Maybe she’ll let it loose in The Lady’s sitting room. Let it climb up the back of one of those massive curtain drapes. Let the Eastern Dominion handle *that* .

By the time Branwen strides back into the main corridor, the cage swinging low at her side, a small crowd has gathered near the parlour archway.

A few houseboys cluster by the mop stand, pretending to polish brass while clearly watching her. One of the page girls half-peeks from behind a velvet curtain. Even Maud stands just off the hallway, arms crossed and lips pressed together, not quite managing to hide her wry smile as Branwen lumbers past, soot-streaked and triumphant with a live rodent in tow.

Branwen ignores them all. She's still hot from the chase, and her palms sting from where the chimbletail had clawed her wrist during capture. Let them whisper. Let them wonder what possessed the Hunting Marshal to come tramping through the parlour wing like a ghost from the hound trials.

But as she rounds the last corner toward the back stairs, a snatch of murmured conversation catches on the air behind her.

"—I'm just saying, he's always down there."

"Even when it's not on his chore chart?"

A faint laugh, "Jonas practically lives in those stables and kennels now. You'd think there was a tunnel from his cot to the hounds."

Another voice, this one sly, "Maybe he thinks the Hunting Marshal will take him for walkies."

Branwen stops at the stairwell landing, the words settling cold in her spine. But she doesn't turn. Doesn't give them the satisfaction of knowing she's heard.

But her grip on the birdcage tightens, just enough that the chimbletail chitters in protest. She takes the steps two at a time, faster than necessary, boots thudding against the wood and not looking back.

Let them gossip. Let them giggle into their aprons and nudge each other with knowing glances. None of them were there during the

storm. None of them had seen Jonas lead her back in, soaked to the bone, after she'd frozen in the yard— stuck in the dark, somewhere between memory and grief.

None of them had seen how he looked at her like she'd come out of a storybook. As if he truly believed she was more than some tired girl who'd run out of things to lose.

She hates how that makes her feel.

The cage creaks in her hand. The chimbletail sneezes.

Branwen exhales through her nose and pushes open the door to the yard, light and wind rushing in. She's got a squirrel to release and a boy to break the news to, and she's not in the mood to let servants' whispers crawl under her skin.

Branwen enters through the side entrance near the tackroom, the one that opens straight into the long corridor between the stables and kennels. She pushes the door shut with her hip, dusting soot from her sleeves and muttering under her breath about squirrels and nobles. She released the chimbletail, but the bastard nearly bit her finger off in the process. She really should have fed it to a dog.

She expects to hear barking. Maybe a whine from the injured hound she left in Jonas's care. Instead, the air is strangely quiet… *Still,* but for the creak of leather tack shifting overhead and the faint crackle of something cooling.

She rounds the partition into the main kennel hall and stops short.

Jonas is crouched near the back wall, back turned, shoulders taut. His overshirt is gone, tossed in a heap beside him with one sleeve singed black at the cuff. A dark patch marks the floor nearby— burnt hay, maybe. He's seemingly cleaned most of it, judging by the overturned bucket and soaked mop head nearby. Steam curls faintly from the floor, and there is a broken lantern.

Branwen blinks.

Ah. So that's what happened.

She takes a quiet step forward, her boot scuff muted on the stone. He hasn't noticed her yet. He's too focused, maybe. She could announce herself. Ask what in the hells happened. Demand to know if he's alright.

But she doesn't.

Because for a second, *just a bloody second,* she's distracted.

Jonas isn't a big lad. He's all narrow shoulders and soft lines, spindly as a thistle stalk. He's got a smattering of freckles between his shoulder blades and a pale flush climbing the back of his neck. His undershirt clings in places, damp from water or sweat or both. It's not like she has never seen godsdamned bare arms before, but this feels distinctly different.

…It's more skin than she's used to seeing on *him.* More… something. He's always fully dressed and covered. Now she sees his scrawny arms.

Her brow furrows.

Gods. She thinks of him as a boy, most days. A skittish and stammering thing. All wide eyes and knotted hands. But he isn't a child. Not really. Not legally, anyway. And she's not that much older — ten years, if that. Maybe less. She's never been good at guessing.

She leans her shoulder to the doorframe.

It's absurd. She's the one who threw herself into a chimney for him. Who caught a soot-covered vermin like it was a matter of national security. And now here he is, sleeveless and thin undershirt and staring into a blackened patch of hay like he's seen the ghosts of every ancestor he's ever had.

She stays there longer than she means to, watching him crouch like he's mourning the bloody scorch mark. There's ash on his jaw, and his hair's half-flattened like he dragged a wet sleeve over it in haste. She could walk away. He hasn't seen her. But the familiar tug starts in her chest again— that damned, traitorous urge to be soft.

Then she remembers something. The jam tart, and an objectively stupid idea comes to mind.

She'd moved it earlier, into a tackroom. Branwen backtracks back to it and quickly wraps it in a bit of cloth. It's still sweet-smelling. She then re-enters the hall and crosses the space between them, not silently.

Jonas looks up at the sound of her boots.

She stops just short of him, one brow raised.

“Turns out your fair folk was a squirrel,” She says dryly.

Jonas startles. His mouth parts in silent alarm. His hands fly to his chest as if to shield himself, fingers curling around the edges of his thin undershirt. He turns half away, flushed crimson, like she’s just walked in on him changing.

Right. *Now* would be the time where she should cut it short, make some barbed remark about chimney ghosts and gullible boys. Tell him to stop being so jumpy and get it together. But the way relief washes over his face— earnest, unguarded— it stops her. So she continues with the tart in hand.

“Also,” She says, holding out the wrapped tart casually, “Found this in the soot. Just there and pristine… Wonder where it came from…” Her voice lowers, making it so that… maybe something *else* is making her speak, “I just had a feeling it should be yours.”

She places it on the nearest bench before he can sputter anything, and turns to go without fanfare, tugging her gloves back on like the whole thing’s no big deal.

Because it isn’t. She’s not going soft.

She doesn’t glance back.

Not really.

Just— Just a quick check after she slips behind a wall. That's all.

He's still sitting on the floor, now with the tart in hand, staring at it like it's made of goldleaf and miracles. His eyes are wide, shining in the half-light. Like he's just been handed something holy. Like he's just been blessed. *Yes, yes, it's all actually some magical forest spirit, Jonas. Now you get shortbread and jam tarts from yours truly. Make of that as you will. Grace to the small ones, or whatever.*

She reminds herself again that this is— actually absurd. But also, not completely pointless. Jonas needs to… eat more, obviously. Branwen may not be one for etiquette but she's well-aware that she can't just make a comment on a man's body *to* him, even if it's telling him to get more fat on his bones. That'd probably put Jonas into more of a tailspin than the ghosts and fair folk ever could.

She's just being practical. *Responsible.*

Branwen huffs once, quietly. She doesn't believe in rituals. Or blessings. Or luck. Not anymore.

She'd done everything right, hadn't she? Recited the words during the Tethering and carved those fucking runes by the creek. She stayed. And what had that gotten her?

Two bloated corpses bobbing in floodwater for gods know how long.

A destroyed farm, the land sagging like a broken back.

And sisters off in whatever sun-kissed markets or accountancy halls they'd run to, probably not even sure if she was still breathing.

So no, Branwen doesn't do things like light hearth candles for the dead. She doesn't scratch runes or stop at doorways to avoid shadows. Freeholders like to say *"the land remembers."* Branwen had seen what the land did. It drowned what it wanted and didn't ask permission.

She doesn't believe in signs or spirits. If someone leaves her food, it's a test, a rare kindness or a coincidence. If the dogs barked at nothing, it's a fox, not a ghost. If Jonas believes he has a spirit watching over him or that there are fair folk around, well... she isn't going to mock him. She'd seen what desperate belief did to people. Entertaining his beliefs and giving him bits of food seems so tame in comparison. Harmless, surely.

But she can't run a stable on blessings. Can't train hounds with prayers or runes.

All she has is her back, her hands, and the will to wake up again. And if something *had* once watched over her, it had long since turned its face away.

Branwen chews her cheek. She had clawed her way to the post of Hunting Marshal with bleeding knuckles and a split lip, metaphorically and, more than once, literally. Ten years ago, she'd been sleeping under hay carts and drinking rainwater off the tarps of merchants too kind to kick her away. Now she wears fitted leather, barks orders to stablehands and noblewomen alike, and rides the finest horse on the estate. Rilke was gifted to her by the Lady herself. The Lady doesn't give gifts to just anyone.

In her late twenties, she has no plans of leaving.

And yet, comfort sits uneasily on her shoulders, like a borrowed coat.

She thinks about the estate's upper windows, catching the shine of latticework glass.

The Lady lives up there. Sleeps in silk sheets and probably bathed in lavender water. She isn't like the others, not quite. There's less preening, and something more frank. There is something watchful in her restraint, something faintly amused in the way she handles her guests. And she pays Branwen what she is worth. Never once withheld a coin. Never once commented on her bluntness, her scars, or her refusal to gossip.

But still.

Freehold boys get last names if they marry someone with one. Freehold girls get last names if a noble likes them enough to give them one. Branwen would never be an Amaranthe, but The Lady could just… announce something. Make something up. Pick a name at random and then Branwen's in the books. In some official file somewhere. Only then could she get something like a pension started.

And yet, for the years she's been here and how irreplaceable Branwen *knows* she is— The Lady hasn't given her a last name. She knows The Lady likes her. But apparently she's not liked *enough.*

And then, she thinks of how no aid had ever come for her village. There were no carriages that braved the crumbling roads, never brought grain or medicine when it was needed most. The floods took her family, her home, and the nobles like The Lady? The ones who lived in drawing rooms scented with rose oil and pine resin? They had sipped imported wine while entire valleys drowned.

So what right did they have?

What right do I have?

Branwen hates it. Hates that thought.

Because she *knows* how lucky she is now, no last name be damned. A private room. Hot meals. A godsdamned bed with a mattress. She hadn't gone hungry in years. She's not in one of the colonies that nobles like to tear apart. And dammit, she likes the dogs. Likes the rhythm of work, the quiet clout of her position, the way even visiting noblewomen defer to her when it comes to the animals.

Maybe she's a hypocrite. Maybe she's something worse.

Branwen exhales slowly through her nose. Perhaps it's inevitable, that this line of thought would then lead to her sisters. Traitors, she called them. Spat the word like it could shame them into staying. And here she is, probably living better than them, whatever they may be doing out there. She frankly has no idea where they are— *How* they are. Maybe they got their last names. Maybe they've risen above their Freehold heritage.

For a time, Branwen had been angry that they hadn't come to find her. Hadn't even tried. She held onto that immature, childish belief for far too long. But now…

Branwen rubs her thumb along her jaw, where a faint scar curves near her ear. A horse had kicked her there once, years back. She didn't even remember which farm. One of dozens.

Now she knows the truth.

How could her sisters have come, when she'd never sent word? She hadn't waited or told anyone. She'd left the village after only a few days. She hitched rides, slept in barns, and just kept moving. She vanished like a ghost in boots. No address. No real name left with any townkeeper. No letters sent. No, Branwen was the one that hadn't even *tried* .

And even if Hesta and Meinwen *had* wanted to find her, how would they know where to begin?

How could she ever have blamed them? How long did it take for them to be notified of the flood to begin with? How could she have ever done that to her sisters? Done *nothing?* In the end, she was the one who abandoned them.

I'm a hypocrite and a bad sister.

The thought comes soft and brutal. Quiet like rot.

Our parents are dead because I tried to save a stupid goat. And now they probably think I'm dead, too.

She doesn't say it aloud. Wouldn't, ever. That one she buries deeper than all the rest.

There's an uncomfortable tightening in her throat. What the hells is she doing? She'd given Jonas a tart and now her mind has spiralled into something else entirely. *Stupid.* Her jaw tightens and she brings herself back to reality. There's no point in ruminating about ghosts, real or otherwise.

She looks back at where Jonas was. He's left during the short time she was lost in her thoughts. He even cleaned the rest of the burn, and it looks as though nothing ever happened. The hound with the bad paw looks over at her.

"Don't look at me like that," Branwen growls, then meanders off to the tack room.

She finds him three days later in the kennels, kneeling on a woven mat with a stack of fresh linens beside him. The air smells of straw, soap, and rosemary oil. A small bucket of water sits to his left, untouched but cooling, and his sleeves are rolled carefully past his wrists. The hound with the sore paw is sprawled nearby, thumping her tail lazily against the floor.

Jonas doesn't notice her at first. He's focused on the task at hand. He lifts one of the linen wraps, folds it into thirds, and re-folds it again with careful precision. His mouth moves in a silent count. Then he looks up and sees her, and a flicker of warmth lights across his face.

"O-Oh, he–h-h-hello," He says softly, like it's a relief, "Th–thank–thank y-y-you… for ch-chimney…"

She hadn't seen him since leaving him with the tart. Branwen steps further into the kennels, arms loosely folded, and says dryly, "You didn't burn the place down again, did you?"

His ears flush instantly. He sets the linen aside and starts to rise, hands brushing down the sides of his trousers. His new overshirt—stiffer, borrowed maybe, or hastily mended— gaps slightly where the seam near the shoulder's been pulled taut.

“N-no,” He squeaks out, “I—uh—n-no fire,” Then, with a shy glance upward, “B-But… y-you b-braved… the m-m-main house…”

Branwen gives him a flat look, one eyebrow raised, “Don’t make it sound heroic. It was just a chimbletail. And also three days ago, no point in lingering on it.”

But he smiles. Not a flash of teeth or a polite servant’s grin— just a quiet, soft smile that holds. Something warm and close-lipped, lit from the inside like a hearth that probably doesn’t get used much. And for some reason, that gets to her more than it should.

Jonas, for what is surely an unfathomably reason, decides to insist on her supposed gallant courage, “Y-yo–you’re b-b-brave.”

The words are simple. No irony. No teasing, not that Jonas is the type to *tease.* It’s just fact, as he sees it.

Something in her chest flickers.

Brave. That word.

Her body tenses before the memory even fully forms. Cold water, thick and rushing. An ewe bleating and a dog barking. Her Mam vanishing under the swell. Her Pa shouting.

“ *Get up the rise!* ”

Not brave. She's just the one that didn't die that day.

"I'm not," Branwen murmurs quietly.

But she doesn't let the moment grow legs, doesn't let Jonas even react to her mutterings. She shakes herself like a wet dog and rubs a hand over the back of her neck.

"You busy?" She asks suddenly, voice rougher now, "I could use a second pair of hands."

He blinks owlish, but then again, when does he *not* blink owlishly, "O-oh—um. W-what f-for?"

"Dumb dog's paw's looking red again. I think she'll let me near it if someone keeps her still."

Jonas merely nods and follows her without hesitation.

They crouch beside the hound. Branwen unwraps the paw and then unscrews the lid of a clay jar, the sharp herbal stink of ointment curling into the air. Jonas murmurs something low to the hound, one hand cradling her shoulder, the other braced gently along her ribs. She watches his hands. They're still. Not the kind of still that comes from fear— but the kind born from control. Practised and careful. A servant's grace, but something else too.

He doesn't flinch when the dog shifts or whines softly.

“You and those still hands again,” She mutters.

Jonas’s cheeks pinken, but he doesn’t say anything.

The hound lets out a breath like a sigh and settles further into the floor. Branwen presses her thumb gently into the paw pad, smearing the ointment. Jonas’s grip never falters.

The moment hangs there, quiet.

And Branwen doesn’t feel the need to ruin it.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Hearthurn has been mentioned a couple of times by now, so here's a chapter for it. Let's just call this a worldbuilding chapter...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Jonas sits upright on his narrow cot, the grey light of early morning just beginning to press through the high window above him. It's another big day at the estate and he's awake before everyone else again. The servant's quarters is filled with the soft breaths of sleeping kitchen boys and the faint creak of the beams overhead. Hearthurn is today, and the house will rouse in a flurry soon enough. For now, he does what he usually does when he's up early. He curls his fingers around the letter, the paper gone soft at the folds from how many times he's read it. His brother's handwriting loops across the page in ink gone slightly smudged, and Jonas reads each word again in the silence, mouthing them soundlessly to himself.

Jonas,

I expect you're being worked to the bone, as always. Tell me you're eating properly. Or are you still a sprig? And how much do you get paid anyway? Something decent? Not that coin is more valuable than keeping your skin intact in those places.

Anyhow, it's strange to think it's Hearthurn already. Felt like I only just finished writing my previous letter where I said it was almost time for it! I remember father baking until the air was thick with clove. You'd get flour on your face and swear you hadn't touched a thing. You were always so sure you hadn't. I mean, I know we never had an official Hearthurn because it's a genteel thing, but I feel like we got pretty close to the real deal that one time.

Lina won't let me mark the day here, of course. Not our way, she says. I doubt she even knows the difference between hearth and harvest. She lets me keep the wreath we made as kids, at least. She doesn't care for it, but I keep it in the back of our closet in our bedroom.

Write when you can. I mean it. Even if it's just one of your stiff little reports. I'd rather hear from you than guess what life they're grinding you through. Better yet… How about I visit to see how you are! In fact, I'm packing my bags in between writing this letter. Just wait, I'll be there in no time.

Jonas barely registers Eliam's intention to visit. It's not the first time he's said as much, but he has never shown up, and always apologizes in another letter for failing to arrive because one thing or another got in the way. It's alright, though, Eliam is surely busy with Lina's inn. That's important work. Jonas doesn't mind. He *doesn't.*

He reads on.

P.S. Did you ever get those tinctures? I know they cost more than a few coppers, but I sent what I could. Lina thinks they're all snake oil, but the woman selling them swore by her brother's improvement— said he was near-fluent within the season. First the person who visited the inn and then the seller herself. Crazy how so many people have stutters. Anyway, she showed me a letter and everything. I thought, well, maybe it's different for you. Maybe it would help.

Imagine it, Jonas. You speaking without struggle. No more chewing your words down like gristle. You could read for guests. Recite. Even perform, if you wanted. They wouldn't see you as one of those meek little boys who can't lift their gaze from the floor. Not if you carried yourself well. Wore decent cuffs.

Think about it. Just think.

It's Hearthurn. You could have entered the competition this year, if you'd made something proper. You could even introduce your own dish if you could speak. I hear they let men from the lower houses enter now— just for show, of course, but even a foot in the door's something, right? I think your estate is the type to do a sort of Hearthurn for servants too, which means unmarried men like you can do something for it. Lina says it's a farce, all of it, but I think it's progress. I do.

Anyway. I suppose this letter is all over the place now. Let me know how things are. And don't work yourself into knots. Or do. I know you will regardless.

—Eliam

Hearthurn.

The celebration of sweet labour and worthy husbands. The *true* genteel holiday, generally reserved for the upper class and frequently imitated, whether by ambitious merchant families hoping to marry up, or by village husbands pretending their kitchens are marble-clad.

Noblemen are expected to present their skills at the table not as mere cooks, but as keepers of the hearth, as dependable, delicate, and resourceful as the wives who chose them. They braid citrus peels into symbols of fidelity. Fold lavender shortbreads like letters of love. The women judge, of course.

Commoners have their own versions. The flour is cheaper and the tea oversteeped. The judging isn't always done by wives, but by sisters or cousins or sweethearts. Jonas's family didn't participate in their town's version of Hearthurn every year, but what little they did, he

enjoyed. All the attention was generally on his father. It was one of the few times Jonas didn't have all eyes scrutinizing him.

Jonas doesn't have strong opinions about it anymore. Not really. As a servant, he mostly observes it now. He helps and moves where he's told, hands off ladles and dishes, and follows behind with towels and trays. He's used to the noise, the pomp and the gentle thrum of self-importance that fills the noble dining hall… and the sighs of wives pretending to be surprised their husbands can bake a decent tart.

Hearthurn is just another working day. A long and loud one.

Still, his brother's letter lingers in his lap like heat from a cooling tray.

He touches the corner of the letter, tracing where Eliam's hand must've pressed the paper down. This letter is perfumed too. Then, reluctantly, he reaches into the pouch of coin he keeps on the crate next to him. There isn't much left, not after he spent part of it on the first batch of honey and spices, the ones meant for Branwen. *The ones Fenn swiped and probably ate,* he thinks bitterly.

He should've said something then. He *should* have.

He could still buy the tinctures, probably. Something diluted, or one of the cheaper vials. Nothing big, like Eliam is no doubt expecting him to buy. But he finds his fingers curling tight around the coins, his thumb brushing the worn ridge of a low-denomination piece.

He's going to try again. Another spiced honey-cake. A smaller one this time. He'll manage.

It's not that he doesn't care about what Eliam says. He does. But—

But *this* feels more urgent. He wants to make something for Branwen. He doesn't want to make something for a contest, or to receive praise… Just something for her. A honey-cake that doesn't get taken or ruined.

It's not that he doesn't value his brother's hope.

It's just that… baking for Branwen— *trying again*— takes priority. He feels guilty for spending his brother's money. But not guilty enough to stop. Because in his chest, under everything else, baking something for her simply matters more.

Jonas sighs and puts the letter away. He feels around for a moment for his mother's red thread, hoping it may protect him again. Other servants and kitchen boys are beginning to stir. No point in ruminating over his brother's letter any longer, he has to work for Heathurn.

Jonas doesn't plan to pass through the main dining hall. He means to take the servant's corridor behind the gallery stairwell, but it's been cordoned off with embroidered sashes, no doubt for 'guest flow.' Someone has tacked a handwritten sign to the wall beside it: *STAFF TO KITCHENS THROUGH WEST HALL,* which means doubling back, crossing the front of the estate, and worse, cutting directly past the dining room where the nobles are gathering.

He braces himself.

Then he turns the corner and steps into the full, perfumed chaos of Hearthurn morning.

The main dining hall isn't just grand; it's calculated splendour. Massive in length and vaulted in height, it's a room built to awe, and it doesn't disappoint. The ceiling arches, panelled in warmwood and lacquered to a rich amber gleam. Chandeliers float above like celestial bodies, dripping crystal and gilt like overripe fruit. Wreaths of twisted ivy and ribbon hang from every beam, still fresh with dew. Beneath all that grandeur, the dining table stretches forty paces long, dressed in formal silver linen and a sprawling centrepiece of dried flowers and sugarwork: a tableau of women harvesting wheat, carrying platters of bread, and one— with a gold-leaf apron— pouring syrup into a gleaming basin.

Clusters of noblewomen have already gathered, dressed in everything from formal brocade to relaxed morning silks. Laughter rings out like silver bells. The air smells of myrrh powder and roast quince.

Jonas lowers his eyes as he passes, but catches flickers of detail anyway. Some involuntary servant instinct logs what matters.

As the eldest and presumed heir of the estate, Lady Alis stands near the head of the table, unmistakable in her stiff dark surcoat and high-collared cuffs. She carries the rigid bearing of a woman trained to speak over waves and weather, and her words cut the air with naval precision.

"It is a security failure, Merevine. We haven't charted a full tide-year since the tribunal. The Channel can't afford another—" She breaks off at a cousin's murmur. Her mouth presses thin.

Beside her, Lady Merevine lounges half across a silk-backed settee, loose curls pinned into something that must have started as an updo

and lost the battle halfway through. Her fingers twist a soft-stemmed flower, an orchid maybe, as she replies with a grin Jonas can't hear. Her robe is open at the throat, cuffs undone. Not quite disrespectful. Just the kind of careless ease only the nobility can afford. Maud would yell at him if Jonas was ever so sloppy.

Lady Merevine is smiling. Lady Alis is not.

Across the room, younger cousins and court ladies cluck over the entrance list, speculating on which househusbands have the skill or charm to impress them. A few names crop up that Jonas doesn't recognize. Someone hoots at gossip about a tart gone wrong. Laughter flares again.

They're all waiting. Not for desert and certainly not for the servants.

For their men.

For the sweet buns and croissant towers and fruited custards that are, at this very moment, being fumbled together in the kitchens by dolled-up husbands with flour on their lashes and ribboned gloves smudged with icing sugar.

Jonas can't imagine Eliam here. Not really, not after having seen this dining hall properly again. He surely just wouldn't… Fit in anywhere. Even in fantasy, the image slips sideways into parody. Eliam might have wanted to be seen in a room like this. Might have dreamt of being the sort of man who earns polite applause and flattered praise from The Lady's daughters. But in practice?

Would he have hated the posturing? The enforced sweetness and the absurdity of it all?

Jonas doesn't know. Maybe Eliam *would* fit right in. It's been so long since he's seen his brother in person that he can't be sure. There's only so much he can gleam from letters.

He ducks his head and keeps walking.

The kitchens are still two corridors away. There'll be yelling when he gets there, there always is. But he doesn't mind. The hard part is already behind him. The dangerous part. The room of women he could never be part of, which will soon become the room of men he will never become.

A shoulder slams into his as someone passes, hard enough to make Jonas stagger. A ripple of snickers follows behind him. He doesn't turn, but he knows by now. Merrill steps out from a side alcove, arms folded, grin slow and sharp. Fenn sidles up beside, smelling faintly of spilled sugar and yeast.

"Well, if it isn't the kennel boy," Merrill drawls, "You must be sad to be out of your little pen and getting your hands on kitchen work. You must be missing your dear Hunting Marshal, aren't you?"

Jonas presses his lips into a thin line. His apron suddenly feels heavy.

"Don't bother," Fenn says, eyes glinting, "He won't answer. He's too busy daydreaming about the Marshal warming him up in the hay."

"It's why she keeps him. She's not the gentle sort, but maybe that's how he likes it. You think she gives him scraps after?"

Jonas's mouth works, but nothing comes. He tries to summon the words, any words. Instead, all he can do is picture the knot of red thread tucked beneath his pillow. Safe. Protected. Branwen, too, her voice as sharp as a crow's caw, fierce enough to ward off worse than these two. If he holds fast to that, maybe he won't come apart.

Fenn steps closer, close enough that Jonas cowers, "Soft little thing. Careful though, keep trembling like that and you'll piss yourself in front of all the Lords and Ladies. They'll cane you for that."

A shout from the kitchens cuts the air— Someone bellowing for hands to get moving. Merrill smirks, taps the edge of Jonas's shoulder with two fingers, it makes his skin crawl, "Better hurry, Knotjaw. Don't keep the husbands waiting."

And then they're gone, swallowed into the clatter of footsteps and voices.

Jonas stays in the hall a beat longer, pulse too loud in his ears. He forces his feet to move again, but his shoulders curl tighter than before. He clings to the red thread and forest spirits in his thoughts, like a lifeline, but the old fear curls inside him all the same. Just as it did last time Merrill cornered him, all oily insinuation.

Just as it did when Fenn stole the ingredients for Branwen's spiced honey cake.

The Hearthurn kitchen is not the usual servant's scullery tucked behind the wine cellars. This is the East Kitchen— Rarely used and lavishly appointed… Not to mention something only opened only twice a year. Once during the new year's preserve-making, and once now, for Hearthurn.

It is a gilded place, built not for utility but for display, a chamber of polished countertops, leaded windows, and brass-bottomed pans hang in shining rows like ceremonial weapons. This is not a place where flour dusts the floor or grease darkens the hearthstones. No soot lives here. No dish-boy curls to sleep under the workbench. No mouse dares linger.

Into that delicate, gleaming space, an army of men in embroidered aprons flutters like agitated birds. They are not professionals. But they are not amateurs either, not really.

These are househusbands of noble stock: sons of minor baronesses, consorts of ruling governors, exquisitely soft-handed husbands of merchant heiresses. Some have been tutored in pastry by private chefs. Others have practised for weeks in specially built test kitchens, learning how to fold, ice, pipe, and sugar roses onto cakes with trembling devotion.

They are not built for this. Jonas can see that much. Their bodies are unused to heat, to lifting and to standing upright for hours at a time. But they move with intent, measured and careful, fussy in the way only the genteel type can be.

There is no Lord Thedden. Jonas silently thanks his spirit envoy for that stroke of luck.

The air thickens with steam and vanilla, and the sound of two dozen delicate crises. A croissant collapses here. A custard refuses to set there. One young husband Jonas doesn't recognize— face powdered, hair pinned back with a little chain of freshwater pearls— fans a tray of burnt nut tarts while trying not to cry.

Jonas steps lightly among them, quiet in dark linen, fetching what they need without being asked. A bowl of egg wash. Another tray. A silver sugar sifter from the top shelf. More honey. The rhythm takes him, urgent and unrelenting. The sting of Merrill's and Fenn's words dull with every step and task. The flood of sound, sugar, and steam presses so thick that there's no room left for spite. By the time Jonas passes someone a chilled cream basin, the confrontation in the hallway has already blurred, tucked away like an unpleasant dream.

He is not allowed to speak except in emergency. He would not dare anyway. He already feels exhausted because of Merrill and Fenn, he doesn't need to add to it.

Some of the husbands flinch when they realise he is near, but most do not notice him at all.

In the centre of it all, like a rose blooming in sugar and sunlight, stands Lord Arleth.

His robe is dove-grey silk, stitched at the collar with tiny cranes in mid-flight. His gloves, permitted only because of an old childhood burn, are cream satin with embroidered cuffs. His dark hair is swept into an elaborate curl behind his left ear, pinned with a saffron ribbon. It's a not-so-subtle nod to the dessert he is preparing.

Saffron-twisted honey buns with orange-zest glaze and pressed violet petals, among other dishes. Jonas does not stare. He does not need to.

Everyone already knows the truth.

Lord Arleth is going to win.

He always does. This is *his* mother's estate, it's technically *her* competition. The other men will nod and smile and flutter their lashes. If they are lucky, they will earn polite applause or a small poem from their wife's sister praising their almond pastry.

But Lord Arleth will get the wreath and the trophy.

Just like last year.

And the year before that.

…And the year before that.

He does not even seem smug about it. That is the worst part. He is serene, gracious, almost painfully modest as he whisks his cream, as if the whole room has not been designed to tilt in his favour.

A noblewoman's son has no legal right to inherit— not land, nor official titles. Not even a cottage, and it's the same for the commonfolk. Should anything happen to Eliam's wife, Jonas's brother will not be inheriting the inn. It will go to a female relative. The law is clear. But a son with poise, with grace and artistry, a son who can cook and charm and compose an epigram for a melon tart?

He can win everything else.

He can win affection. Jonas has heard enough whisperings relating to social rank, strategic marriages and dinner invitations to last a lifetime. He knows that entire reputations hinge on a man's display of tasteful, winsome restraint. Eliam once wrote with a sort of bitter wistfulness about it. How even men like Lord Arleth are not free,

exactly, but they are adored. And that is a kind of freedom. Jonas never replied to that letter.

Jonas carefully places the icing sugar tin onto the nearest counter and steps back without a word when someone calls for another chilled cream bowl. Someone asks if there are candied almonds left.

Jonas turns to fetch them.

He is not a husband. He is not a contestant.

He is just a servant.

But tonight, after all this, he will bake something else. Despite Merrill's and Fenn's words getting under his skin, poking and prodding at a deep insecurity he tries to ignore, Jonas will try to bake for Branwen again.

She might just simply eat it without much thought. But that feels more real than all the ribbons in this room. Until then, Jonas does not stop moving. A dozen voices— smooth, strained, pampered, panicked— call for things at once.

"Bowl, large! No, larger, I need to fold the egg whites."

"Has anyone seen my star anise? Don't you dare touch my station, Berril!"

"I said sifted, not dumped. What is this? Ugh, gods, where is the

servant?”

“Boy! You, yes. I need lemon peel, not zest. Are you thick?”

Jonas moves through it all like a ribbon of water, winding between stations, quiet and invisible. This is far from his first Hearthurn. He has learned years ago that hesitation slows everything, so he does not hesitate.

A whisk in one hand. Sugar in the other.

A fistful of cloves deposited without comment onto a marble slab.

A rolling pin caught from falling midair, just before it can clatter to the ground and shatter a dish of carefully shaped plum rosettes.

He is quick and small. The noblemen barely look at him. They point. They snap. They frown if he takes more than three seconds. Few thank him. That is not the done thing.

One nobleman in robin’s-egg blue— lace cravat, spotless hands— reaches out mid-whisk and demands a third spoon. Jonas passes it silently. Another forgets he is there, shoves past him, and sends flour across Jonas’s shoulder like white confetti. He brushes it off and keeps walking. The air is hot. Thick with caramelised sugar, baking stonefruit, and sweat from men unused to standing so long without a cushion under them. Even their voices are strained now, cracking under the weight of high-stakes sweetness. The competition is not supposed to be vicious, not among refined men, but he can feel it in the tension for the men at least vying for second place. The air is thick at each station. Well, each station except for Lord Arleth’s.

Jonas fetches cloves, cardamom, cinnamon sticks, nut graters. He restocks parchment paper. Scours a measuring scale when one nobleman accuses another of smudging it with butter. Someone snaps their fingers and shouts, “Pastry ring!” Jonas passes one down the line. Another calls out, “You there! The boy!” and points at a puddle of syrup on the floor. Jonas wipes it clean.

Lord Arleth himself— smiling, poised, a little glow of cinnamon at the tips of his fingers— nods toward the chilled cream basin. Jonas, already anticipating the need, brings it forward before the man has to ask. Unlike in the hunting party, he does not receive a thank-you. But Lord Arleth glances at him, just briefly, with the faintest twitch of his lips that might mean acknowledgement.

Jonas looks away. A cog in the carefully choreographed machine of upper-class domestic theatre.

The scent of almond tarts is starting to turn sharp. Someone has overbaked theirs. The man next to Jonas begins to panic. Jonas fetches a cooling rack, then a cloth, then gently turns the tray to help hide the burnt edge.

No one notices.

They never do.

And that, in a way, is the point.

Everything is finally finished. Tarts are glazed. Cakes are cooled.

Meringues stand stiff and triumphant. And now, the procession begins.

It starts with bells. Small silver ones tied with pale blue ribbons, rung delicately by kitchen boys with polished shoes and blank expressions. Jonas takes his place just behind them, carrying a platter of rose-jam bites that are not his, his fingers smudged with sugar that doesn't belong to him.

The noblemen follow in slow, graceful steps. Not all, only those who can bear to walk with proper poise after the morning's exertion. They are changed now, each one freshly powdered and combed, dressed in performance silks. Their aprons have been ceremonially removed, folded by hand, and carried on velvet trays as proof of their labour, a genteel offering. A ritual act of service.

It takes *forever*.

Each husband walks with his chin slightly lowered, eyes demure, arms carefully positioned to display the dessert he has crafted. Not a one dares take a bite— Not until, and unless, his wife gives permission. To eat what he has made for her before her judgement is not just gauche. It is insubordinate.

Jonas steps forward to open the tall dining hall doors.

Inside, the grand hall gleams with polished wood and deliberate excess. Sunlight pours through long, arched windows.

Each noblewoman is seated high in her upholstered chair, draped in her house colours. Fans rest folded beside embroidered place cards. Gleaming cutlery glint beneath the daylight. At the head of it all sits The Lady and her eldest daughter.

The Lady rises.

She has not changed out of her riding clothes, though her boots have been polished and her gloves removed. She smiles at her guests, then lifts her arms slightly as if invoking something larger than the room can hold.

“Ladies of the hall,” She says, “Your husbands have laboured with sweetness and spirit. But today is not merely a day for indulgence. No, it is a reaffirmation. Of lineage, of love, of discipline.”

A few husbands shift where they stand.

“With sugar, we recall our unity. With spice, our purpose. The Dominion does not endure by force of arms alone, but through care, through creation, through the small acts that bind a household. Let no one doubt it: we stand today not only to eat. We taste what has been offered in love and loyal service.”

There is polite laughter, though a few of the noblewomen are already lifting their fans to hide the beginnings of smiles.

“With the winds shifting in the eastern provinces and trade at a turn, let this competition remind us of what is stable. Of what endures. The Dominion holds because we hold. Our lands. Our names. Our recipes.”

Another wave of gentle, approving chuckles follows. The Lady smiles, then sits back, nodding for the presentation to begin. Jonas keeps his face blank. These speeches do tend to sound the same regardless of the event.

One by one, the noblemen step forward, offering their creations with murmured flourishes and slight bows. Plates are passed. That, too, is ritual. No noblewoman lifts so much as a sugared spoon herself. It falls to servants like Jonas to serve the slices, bring the napkins, sweep the crumbs, and carry away the polished plates once their use is done.

He moves quietly to the side, where he stands near the wall. This is the easier part. The duller part— But there is a pang of nerves, different from normal. Briefly, his eyes dart around to look for Merrill and Fenn. He's not quite sure what their duties are for today, but he hopes that they're busy enough to not want to interfere with him. Jonas's stomach turns to knots at the thought of Merrill tricking him to do something in front of the nobles again.

But he does not see them.

He exhales slowly through his nose.

It is going to be a long day.

As he shifts, just enough to stretch the small of his back, he glances out through the tall, unshuttered window behind him. Outside, on the gravel path below, Branwen is working with the stablehands. His eyes want to linger on her despite himself, but Jonas can't look at for long, for he has to move quickly. He holds a tray. Waiting for a noblewoman to decide whether a tart has been glazed to her liking.

He lowers his gaze when he has to move again. The silver catches a dull reflection— His own face, too pale under the polished lights, the collar too tight, the sleeves too starched.

As he takes some empty plates, The Lady's voice rings clear and satisfied.

"Now this… a saffron-twisted honey bun, by my darling Arleth…"

Jonas lets out a breath he didn't realise he was holding. Only nine more entries to go… Maybe ten. Gods help him if someone brought a second-tier offering.

He shifts his weight as he returns back to waiting for a command. The tray wobbles faintly in his grip.

And he waits.

As Hearthurn slowly, *slowly,* begins to wind down, Jonas finds himself standing behind The Lady's seat. He's quiet as polished silver, holding a folded napkin and waiting for the next half-eaten tart to be passed his way. From where he stands, he can see them all— The Lady's children and their spouses, each draped in noble silk and family pride.

He does not know the names of the spouses. Not really. He heard them once, long ago, during a rain-lashed morning of wedding speeches. Forgotten now, like most things not relevant to his work. But he watches them, like all good servants do. You learn that way.

Lady Alis is speaking low to her husband. Jonas cannot hear the words, but her tone is gentler than usual, something round and low, nothing like the clipped commands she uses with the estate staff or even her sister. The Tide Theorist wears her uniform like a skin. Her

naval wool is dyed dark blue, the brass clasps polished, the collar precise. A small braid at her temple holds tide-charts and family pins. But here, at the table, her shoulders ease, just slightly, as she leans toward the man beside her.

Her husband is delicate in the way most noble househusbands are—smooth-skinned, soft-spoken, and his hands likely free of calluses. He watches her like she has parted the sea just for him. There is no fear in his expression, no theatrical deference. Just steady warmth.

When she chuckles quietly, it startles Jonas. Whatever passes between husband and wife is brief. Polished and probably invisible to most at this table. But Jonas sees it clearly. She loves him. And he loves her. It is the most shocking thing he has seen all day.

In contrast, Lady Merevine sits cool and smiling, brushing a crumb from her sleeve while her husband dabs carefully at her plate. She answers him when he makes a comment. She even tilts her head in a mock-coquettish way that might fool a guest. But Jonas has seen her on estate walks with the botanists, laughing with her eyes alight. Or sprawled in a sunny alcove with a herb catalogue in her lap. Here, at the table, she looks dulled.

Her husband is pale and immaculately dressed, his fingers set with careful rings. A fashionable silk wrap encircles his wrist. He watches her like he is waiting for permission to breathe. Jonas doubts she notices.

Jonas doesn't think Lady Merevine hates her husband, but if he had to guess, her marriage started and ended with land agreements between families. Affection has not bloomed, not like with Lady Alis and her spouse.

Lady Merevine has not touched her dessert.

Then there is Lord Arleth.

It is expected he will win again. That is not why Jonas now keeps stealing glances at him.

Lord Arleth's smile is perfect and mannered. But underneath it, there is something else. Something smug, in a way Jonas finds unfamiliar. Not the blundering smugness of spoiled boys. No, this is deliberate. Almost trained. It surprises Jonas. He had not seen it in the kitchen. Suddenly, Lord Arleth seems like someone else entirely. Though, he supposes, he shouldn't be surprised. It's not as though he truly knows any of these people.

Lord Arleth leans to whisper to his wife. Jonas can tell from the angle of his body. What is strange, possibly scandalous, is that she leans back. Not like Lady Alis's husband, who leans in to listen and share. No. Lord Arleth's wife leans in with her eyes lowered, her fingers tight on the stem of her wineglass, her shoulders slightly hunched.

Jonas has seen her only a handful of times before. She always struck him as tightly wound, the sort who winces when stablehands forget to bow. Now she looks... smaller. Not simply tired, but worn down in some deep, unseen place.

She defers to Lord Arleth. Not with the formal courtesy that noble society teaches, but in the quiet, invisible way of someone trained to anticipate and endure. The way a person bends before they are asked. The way a husband should with a wife.

Jonas feels something turn in his chest. A pinch, a breath caught somewhere behind the ribs.

That is not how it is meant to be. A noblewoman is not supposed to flinch or yield. A man, *especially* a husband, is meant to give sweetness, not shape weariness. He is meant to soften his wife's days, to kneel in devotion and be beautiful for her. That is what the *Genteel Standard* has said for as long as Jonas has been reading it. He knows the column voices by name, knows which ones favour delicate pastries or flower arrangements to soothe a matron's mood. One even once recommended practising silence in mirrors. Jonas tried it, when he was younger. Obedience, after all, is survival. And beauty— if not by face, then by conduct— was a kind of safety too.

But now, watching Lord Arleth's wife sit drawn and anxious beside her husband, Jonas feels something unfamiliar rise inside him. Not envy. Not sympathy, even. Just wrongness. A quiet churn of disbelief. The roles are reversed, and it unsettles him more than he expects.

He had thought, once or twice, about how strange it is to always be expected to yield. To be made smaller. To make his voice soft, his hands still. But that was the way of things. And seeing it reversed— watching a woman retreat into herself while her husband watches on, smiling like a cat— feels infinitely worse somehow.

He looks away.

He thinks, suddenly, of Branwen. Of the way her voice sounds when she speaks to him, not like an order but a tether. When she said his name to him for the first time. No one had ever said it like that before — like he was a fact, not a function. She never asked him to shrink, only to show up. An occasional request to brush horses or help with the hounds in some way. And while he struggles to speak and doesn't do it often, she listens.

He has never felt smaller with her. Only quieter, in a good way. Like there is room to breathe.

And though he would still follow her lead, fall into step without needing to be told, offer what he could with open hands, none of it would come from fear. She wouldn't take what he didn't mean to give. That part felt simple. It is the wanting that puzzled him. It is just… ease. Like something in him recognised its place, without knowing why. Jonas cannot name the feeling exactly, it settles cold beneath his ribs.

And then, just as swiftly, another voice intrudes. Merrill's drawl, sharp and poisonous in his ear as he remembers his cruel implications. Jonas swallows, fingers tightening on the tray.

It stings, because a part of him cannot entirely push the thought away. He doesn't *really* know her beyond a spiritual envoy, does he? He has seen how the others look at him, the smirks, the sidelong glances, the whispers curling through the servant's hall. He cannot silence any of them. Jonas tells himself Branwen is not like that. She's not cruel. She's not entertaining his existence because she thinks he might be… entertainment in some way. But the words coil tight, pressing like a splinter he cannot dig out.

Which— is why he needs to get this spiced honey-cake finished. Not only as thanks but to… Know her better. *Yes.* Jonas would like to know her more.

Eventually, he is called to pour tea, and Jonas is on the move again.

The tea is Ladycherry infusion, floral and pale, poured through filigree strainers into hand-painted porcelain. Jonas moves quietly among them, refilling cups that are already half-full, a ghost with a kettle.

"The rosewater clafoutis," Murmurs a duchess in lilac, tilting her spoon in appraisal, "Is so earnest this year. It reminds me of my first steward's attempts at poetry. All very... heartfelt."

The woman beside her titters behind her fan, “Oh yes. As delicate as a hand-stitched hem, on a barn apron.”

Soft laughter trails behind them like expensive perfume. Jonas sets a fresh fork beside the elderwoman’s plate and moves on.

A noble from the city, a Lady of modest lands, holds her napkin like a command, “Now this one,” she says, dabbing the corner of her mouth with theatrical gentleness, “Reminds me of the very first Hearthurn I ever attended. I must have been eleven.” She taps the edge of the plate. “The baker then had such *lofty* aspirations. I’m told he lives quietly now. In a place where no one minds when the sugar crystallises.”

“Mm,” Hums another, *“Ambition* can be so unbecoming for a man. One forgets one’s station when one dreams too far.”

Across the table, someone spoons up another dessert Lord Arleth prepared. The Lady has only just announced it with her usual unbending praise: “Once again, my son honours us with his culinary brilliance,” and the table ripples with obligatory murmurs of delight.

Jonas notices the small pause before one of the matrons speaks.

“Ah yes. Velvet fig and saffron custard. A… *daring* combination.”

“Quite *bold,”* Says another, her brow lifting, “It must be nice to have so much freedom to experiment. A more modest husband might never presume to *dominate* such a dramatic palette.”

Jonas's hand stills slightly as he reaches for an empty tart plate. He does not look up.

A third woman, younger, her gold collar clasped in the old provincial style, stirs her tea slowly, "I did wonder who had the final say on presentation. There's something so... *assertive* in the sugarwork lattice. Almost militaristic."

"Oh, but she's always been a generous wife," Comes a smoother voice, another cousin of The Lady perhaps, "Letting him arrange the garnishes and shine his own boots, so to speak."

Polite laughter. A rustle of silk sleeves and lifted fans. Lord Arleth's wife says nothing. She only adjusts her brooch, a little too quickly.

Jonas bends his head, replaces a spoon, and passes behind them without a sound. Servants are supposed to hear nothing, but how could he not?

The women continue.

"I do hope he didn't tire himself too much. Last year's tart had such *stamina."*

"A very *forward* flavour, wasn't it?"

"Mm. And the crust, well. Not all men can manage such a *firm* edge."

Fans flutter. One woman stifles a laugh behind her teacup, pinky ring glittering like a blade. Then the oldest of The Lady's guests leans in, her voice low but meant to carry, "If he's not careful, the Faceless

Dowager will come for him."

A younger matron gasps in mock alarm, "Oh, hush. That's a nursery tale."

"It is not," The older insists, "She walks the halls at night, you know. Finds men who overstep and leads them away. When she lifts her veil, they see only their own foolish face staring back. The next morning, they're gone."

"Gone," The cousin echoes, "And replaced with a sweeter, quieter sort."

A ripple of laughter passes around the table. Someone adds, "A cautionary tale for little boys... and perhaps for a certain Lord."

Jonas keeps his eyes on a napkin on the table, but a strange chill slips between his shoulders. The tale sits in his mind like a stone dropped in still water. It isn't unlike the commoners' stories of the fair folk, the ones that say if you speak too proudly or step out of line, they'll spirit you to a hill that isn't really a hill. He tells himself it's just the tea room's draft, certainly not anything to do with women without faces or shadows where things may hide and linger.

He shifts the kettle to his other hand, quickening his pace toward the sideboard. A man can't flinch every time someone tells a ghost story over tea... That would be ridiculous…

Still, he is glad that he is eventually done with tea and returns to standing by the wall.

At the far end of the room, the tall windows are flung open when Lady Merevine complains about it getting too hot in the room. He takes another glance and sees Branwen still outside with a horse and stablehands. She's working a young gelding in the ring. Even from here, Jonas can tell it is one of the high-strung ones— its ears flick back and forth, whites showing, muscles bunching under the sheen of its coat.

She moves with the stablehands in a quiet triangle, her shoulders loose, her voice carrying in phrases he can't hear from here but he imagines her tone as calm and clipped. A twist of her wrist and the lead changes hands. The gelding settles by degrees, head lowering, hooves scuffing in the sand.

Jonas's chest eases without his meaning to.

It strikes him, as it has before, how there is no shrinking in her. For a moment he stands there, tray in hand, letting the bustle of the tea hour blur around him. Then a steward calls for more sugar bowls, and the spell breaks. He ducks his head and moves on.

By the end of it all, Jonas's head throbs with the rustle of fans, the clink of porcelain, and the honeyed venom of noblewomen's voices still echoing in his skull. The great dining hall has finally quieted, its banquet of barbed compliments and sugared scorn winding down. The Lady's final proclamations have been made: Lord Arleth declared the victor again, with the kind of glowing praise that makes everyone else's efforts feel like garnish on his triumph.

Jonas stands beside a silver tray stacked high with dirtied plates, blinking grit from his eyes. Hearthurn is over, but its cleanup has only just begun.

He works with practiced efficiency, carrying stacks of saucers into the scullery behind the performance kitchen. The air is damp and hot, thick with the sour scent of old jam and burnt crusts. The genteel kitchen, so pristine in the morning, now looks like a battlefield, the wreckage of ambition and almond flour scattered across every surface. Men's embroidered cuffs are stained, their fine aprons crumpled in a basket like molted feathers.

But it's the nobles still lingering in the dining hall that catch his tired attention. Cleaning means continued proximity, and proximity means, well, more glimpses.

Lady Alis stands with her husband by a tall window. They look… soft. She's not smiling, but with something in her posture looser, almost tender. Her husband holds her hand loosely in both of his. He says something Jonas can't catch, and she gives a brief laugh, reaching to tuck a curl behind his ear. He blushes. A real blush. Their foreheads touch for a moment.

Lady Merevine has vanished like mist off a kettle. She slipped out the moment the judging ended before her husband had even looked up from his conversation. He is still here, though, in the corner, chuckling softly with a cluster of other well-dressed men. A few wear gold-banded collars, markers of their wife's station. One stares off like his mind has already left the room. They laugh too easily, their jokes mild, their hands twitching with habitual gentleness. Lady Merevine's husband glances toward the door once. Just once.

And then there is Lord Arleth. He and his wife remain at their table, having never risen. He wears a golden wreath, something Jonas and his brother has tried to imitate in their youth. Lord Arleth's wife says something about the trophy— a ridiculous ceramic swan gilded at the edges— and Lord Arleth, with a half-laugh, replies, "Well, if it ever vanishes from the sitting room, I'll just assume you finally tired of losing to your own husband."

His tone is light, breezy, but there is no mistaking the *you* . She smiles, sharp and tight.

“You do love putting on a show, don’t you, my love?”

“That’s what this day is for,” He leans in slightly, voice low but not quite quiet, “Besides, you married me for the performance, didn’t you?”

She says nothing to that. But she adjusts his collar. Not gently. And he lets her.

He is certain that their bed curtains are thick.

Jonas turns away, discomfort curling in his belly. That isn’t the sort of thing shown openly in a noble household. But Lord Arleth has a certain… immunity. Maybe it comes from being the only son. Maybe from The Lady’s favour. Maybe—

“Mind the silver, boy,” One of the older scullery hands snaps, and Jonas jumps.

He returns to his tray. He keeps his eyes down. He wipes plates, dries teacups, and sweeps up broken bits of candied fruit trod beneath someone’s shoe. Eventually, the guests drift out. The perfume fades. The hall dims.

Alone now by the sideboard, folding the last napkins, he feels the ache in his knees, the sugar sting on his fingers, and the echo of every

backhanded compliment he's overheard in the last six hours. The Lady's children have everything his brother dreams of: Status, grace, and position. Eliam would give his good hand to be in this room. To be one of the fine, powdered househusbands, fawned over and judged and celebrated, even in performance.

And yet…

Jonas glances again at the empty chair Lady Merevine left behind. Then toward Lady Alis's husband, still pink from a parting kiss. And finally, toward the sharp gleam of Lord Arleth's wife's eyes as she walks two steps behind him, hands clenched too tightly around her gloves.

Does Eliam really yearn for this? Lady Alis and her husband might just be the lucky ones, but all this theatre— It's so tiring. Jonas picks up the swan-shaped trophy left forgotten on the buffet. It is heavier than it looks. Cold to the touch.

He sets it down, quietly, and turns to leave.

The double doors open before he reaches them. A ripple of perfume and chatter rushes in as the nobles spill out toward the courtyard, their voices bright with anticipation. Somewhere ahead, someone is calling for the hound and the tall roan from the stables. Branwen strides in from the servants' passage, a length of lead rope coiled loosely in one hand, her shoulders set in that particular way that says she has been drafted into something she'd rather ignore. The skirts of two noblewomen brush against her as they pass; she shifts just enough to keep from being touched.

Her eyes flick across the room, pausing on him for the briefest moment. Not a smile, not a frown— Just a steady look that cuts through the gilded noise. It steadies him in turn, though the feeling

comes with a small, inexplicable twist in his gut. Like the ghost of some story told in half-whispers, one he's not sure he remembers right.

And then she is gone again, swallowed by the tide of fine coats and jewel-bright gowns, leaving only the faint smell of hay and cold air in her wake.

Jonas exhales, and follows the quieter corridor out.

The servant's kitchens are still warm from the day's work, having still been used for everything other than noble desserts, though most of the fire had died down to a soft, flickering glow in the hearth. The kitchen boys and scullery maids had long since retired, the floor swept, the pots stacked to dry, the air filled with that comforting scent of bread, woodsmoke, and faint onion peel. It's the only quiet Jonas had known all day.

He rolled his shoulders, stiff from hours on his feet and having practically sprinted to the market and back. He had laid out his few meager ingredients. He'd quickly slipped out and used the last of his brother's coin. All before dark, of course, as men can't go out in town in the late evenings without a female escort. A jar of honey— less golden and far thinner than what the noblemen used— and spices in a twist of cloth from the quarter-market, and just enough coarse flour to make something *resembling* a cake.

Not a large one. Not a proud one. But something.

Jonas had made it as quick as he could, eyes constantly flicking towards the door and worrying that Fenn might find him again. But the other servant may, hopefully, still be busy with some Hearthurn

leftovers and doing whatever work he's been assigned. Jonas hadn't been interrupted but he had certainly rushed the cake due to nerves… But also, it is *finished.*

Jonas cradles the small tin in his hands, fingers smudged with flour and honey. It's far from perfect— sunken in the middle, edges uneven — but it's whole. *His.* Not stolen, not spoiled, not swept into someone else's plate. For the first time, he has something he can bring to Branwen. Something made with his own hands. The thought makes his chest tighten with a flicker of pride, almost joy.

He's just about to slip around the corner, down toward the stables where she might be, when he collides squarely with a nobleman rounding the side path. The man steps back with a huff, brows lifting in mild surprise.

"Oh," He says, eyes flicking over Jonas's apron, his smudged hands and the still-steaming cake, "Another entry. How quaint."

Jonas blinks, stomach dropping, "I—I—"

"Of course, of course," The noble cuts across him with a wave of the hand, airy and careless, the same way they always did when a servant made too much noise, "The staff's Hearthurn has long begun. No need to be shy. A bit of fun for you all, isn't it? After watching the real event."

Jonas clutches the tin tighter. No words come out of his mouth, no matter how hard he tries to respond. He realizes with some dismay that this so-called staff's Hearthurn might be where Merrill and Fenn are.

The noble doesn't wait for him to make a sound, "The others have set

theirs out in the west hall. Do hurry, you're late. The judges are already there, you know. Lady Merevine's husband, among others. The women, of course, are out riding in the fields."

Jonas stands frozen, his voice tangled useless in his throat. He can't just say *no*— Not to a noble. Not with his stutter catching like barbed wire, not when every instinct drilled into him since ribbon-training insists *submit, lower your eyes, serve.*

The noble plucks the tin from his hands, gently but firmly, "Don't dawdle, boy."

Jonas flinches at the touch, but lets go. What choice does he have?

And just like that, his second attempt is gone.

The noble turns, humming tunelessly as he carries the honey-cake away like it's nothing more than a trinket. Jonas doesn't follow. He doesn't dare.

Instead, he slips into the shadows of a garden archway, heart hammering, hands gone cold without the warmth of the tin. Behind him, laughter and chatter spill from the west hall where the servants' Hearthurn takes place. The lesser event, a token mercy from their betters. A chance to be judged by the same noble tongues that complain about bland porridges and scuffed boots.

He can't bear to go in. Not to watch them eat what he made. Not to hear the half-polite critiques, the bored smiles, the backhanded compliments, the chuckling husbands pretending this matters at all. He certainly doesn't want to confirm whether or not Merrill and Fenn are there. Jonas turns and walks away, boots crunching soft on the gravel. He doesn't know if Branwen is even at the kennels. He doesn't

know what he'd even say if she was. Only that anywhere is better than here.

He'd baked something for her. And they took it.

Because they could.

Just like the ingredients the first time. Just like the compliments he never earned. Just like his voice, caught again and again in his throat. He leans his head back against the cool stone wall and exhales.

Why does the world only ever take?

The closer he gets, the emptier everything feels. Soon he realizes that she's not there. No Branwen, no familiar sounds of her voice carrying over the hounds or the horses. Most of the animals are gone, carted off for the noble spectacle.

He tries to breathe slowly, as he'd been taught. In through the nose. Out through the mouth. Count to six. Try again. Still, the self-loathing sits leaden in his stomach, heavy as stone.

"S-st-stupid," He mutters bitterly, words breaking against his teeth, meant for no one but himself, "S-s-stupid s-st—"

His throat catches before he can finish the word, and he clenches his jaw, furious with the stumble. Jonas finds a spot on the low bench against the stable wall and sinks down. His hands tremble faintly, and he folds his arms tight around his middle before pulling his knees up close, curling in on himself.

He presses his forehead to his knees and breathes, shallow and uneven. He tells himself not to cry, not here, not where anyone might wander in and see. But the frustration stings behind his eyes anyway, hot and humiliating.

It was supposed to be hers. Something he made, something to give.

The emptiness of the stables only makes it worse. Branwen isn't here. She doesn't even *know*.

The door suddenly creaks open, the sharp clatter of boots cutting through the hush of the stables. Jonas lifts his head just enough to see her storm in, her braid half-loose and dust smudged down one arm. She doesn't notice him tucked in the shadowed corner. Jonas stiffens, heart pounding behind his rips, too ashamed to make his presence known.

"—bloody idiotic, fancy-ruffed widgeons," She mutters, yanking a rope from a hook, jaw tight with irritation, "Don't know a good hound from a footstool. Why am I supposed to show them around the bloody fields?" She stomps across the floor, tossing the rope over one shoulder, still bristling.

"If I hear one more thing about seasonal berry infusions, I'll tip a tray over someone's powdered head…" She grumbles. Then, sharper, under her breath: "Rather be fetching damn oat sacks with Jonas."

Jonas's breath caught in his chest.

Branwen grabs what she came for, turns on her heel, still muttering.

“Piss on their wine pairings.”

The door slams behind her, leaving the stables quiet once more.

She hadn’t said it to anyone. She wasn’t trying to be kind. That was the thing. It wasn’t praise or comfort or performance. It was just… what she thought. And she thought he was preferable to the nobility.

His heart aches in that odd, unfamiliar way it does around her sometimes. Like it’s stretching. Like something inside him wants to lean. The sting of the theft hasn’t faded. The shame still coils somewhere beneath his ribs. But now there’s something else too, a warmth that sits in his chest like a little ember.

He stays curled on the bench, listening to the faint echo of her voice long after she’s gone. He doesn’t move for a long while, as if shifting might smother that ember before it can catch.

Jonas leans his head back against the wooden wall, Branwen’s words still echoing in his mind. *“Rather be fetching damn oat sacks with Jonas.”* He turns them over, again and again, like smooth stones in his hands. Not flattery. Not even meant for him. And yet it sits in him, warm and fragile, as if his heart is clutching it close. It almost… *almost* makes him— Giddy.

Something then catches his eye in the straw-littered corner. A small bundle, cloth-wrapped, tucked half-behind a beam. He frowns, shifting forward, and reaches for it with tentative fingers. When he peels back the wrapping, the smell reaches him first. Something sweet and buttery. It’s unmistakable. Shortbread.

His breath hitches. For a moment, he just stares, pulse quickening, a prickle running along his skin. Not coincidence. Not chance. Yet another sign. It has to be. The small ones, watching over him. And Branwen— the envoy sent to guard him, to bind him to this place even when he falters.

He cradles the shortbread in both hands, almost trembling, and whispers, halting but solemn: “G-g-grace t-to the s-small ones,” The words come out ragged, but they feel right.

He takes a careful bite, reverent as if partaking in some ritual. Crumbs cling to his lips, the taste melting on his tongue. The day still sucked. A lot. The cake was gone, the sting of mockery still raw, the shame heavy in his stomach. But with each small bite, the sharp edges dull just enough. The ember inside doesn’t vanish. It flares, steady and patient, easing the ache by a fraction.

Jonas swallows, closes his eyes, and lets himself believe— if only for tonight— that he is seen once more, and he is kept.

Days pass since Hearthurn. Branwen is just happy it’ll be another year before she has to deal with that nonsense again.

She finds him in the side hall, down on his knees with a brush in hand, scrubbing out the grooves between flagstones. His sleeves are rolled high, hair damp at the temples, the usual stiffness in his posture oddly loosened. He looks up when she passes, and he grins. Proper grins. Not the twitchy, uncertain smile she’s used to, but something bright and almost boyish. It’s enough to make her pause in confusion.

“Y-you’re h-h-h-h…” He cuts himself off, shakes his head, and tries

again, “Y-you’re headed f-for th-the s-stables?” His words come out tangled, but he looks practically giddy, chest rising quick like he’s caught mid-laugh.

Branwen blinks, “...What’s it to you?” Her tone’s gruff, probably more gruff than it needs to be, because she doesn’t quite know what to do with this sudden version of him.

He wipes his brow with the back of his wrist, then pushes himself to his feet in one smooth, eager movement, “I—c-c-c-can come. If y-you need—”

She snorts, “You’re already run ragged from mucking floors.”

He shakes his head quickly, too quickly, that ridiculous grin still tugging at his mouth, “N-no. I w-want to.”

Branwen squints at him, trying to read what in the hells he’s so thrilled about. For a second, she’s wondering if she’s still dazed from a nap she took earlier. Is Jonas okay? Like… is he actually okay? Is there something in the air? He started a conversation and *doesn’t* look like he’s about to have a heart attack.

She merely grunts and nods at him, saying, “If you’re not busy.”

When they walk side by side out to the yard, she notices he keeps close— closer than usual. His shoulder nearly brushes hers, his step falling into place without her needing to call it. She doesn’t tell him to give space. Doesn’t scold. Normally, she’d bark at someone for crowding her stride. With him, though… she doesn’t. She finds herself listening to his boots crunch against the gravel in rhythm with hers, steady, steady, like he’s trying to match her heartbeat. Then Jonas

blurts out something that almost makes her trip over herself.

“D-d-d’you n-need the o-oat s-s-sacks fe–fetched?” His eyes are wide, hopeful and almost feverish, as though he’s asking after something far grander than horse feed.

“What?”

“S-s-sacks. T-to fetch. For th-the h-horses.”

Branwen raises a brow, “Yes... I was just headed to fetch a pair.”

Jonas quickly wipes his hands on his apron like a boy caught sneaking sweets, “I—c-c-can c-come,” His grin flashes out, unguarded and startling, wide as a sunrise.

Branwen stares. *What the fuck?*

“...It’s only feed,” She mutters, unable to stop the roughness from masking her confusion, “You look like I offered you a festival ticket.”

But Jonas just nods, almost bouncing on his feet, as if hauling dusty sacks from the storeroom is the grandest honour she could have bestowed. The storeroom smells of dry grain and old timber. Branwen shoulders the door open and jerks her chin toward the stack, “Two sacks. Mind your back.”

Jonas all but leaps forward, gripping one sack and straining to lift it. His arms tremble with the effort, but he doesn’t falter, hugging it to

his chest like treasure. The grin hasn't left his face.

Branwen hefts her own with ease, watching him from the corner of her eye. He should look ridiculous, thrilled over such a chore. Instead, it does something to her chest she doesn't care to examine.

"It's oats, Jonas. Just oats."

But when he beams at her like it means something more, she has to look away. They walk shoulder to shoulder again, neither stepping aside. And though she keeps her expression flat, inside she can't quite shake her bafflement… Or the faint, traitorous warmth curling low in her ribs.

Jonas doesn't stop at the oat sacks.

Once they've dropped them off in the feed room— even with the sacks, he paused and avoided stepping on any shadows when entering the stables— he lingers, brushing oat dust from his sleeves and glancing about like he's already searching for the next task. When Branwen stoops to gather a few empty pails, he blurts, "I-I c-c-can d-do th-that," Before she can argue, he's taken two from her hand, carrying them as if they're made of gold.

Branwen frowns, "They're empty."

Jonas nods quickly, as though emptiness makes them even better. He follows her out into the yard, practically trotting to keep beside her stride. Every time she points at something— harnesses hung out to dry, scattered brushes, a cart that needs shifting— he's there first, eager hands snatching at the work like a child catching falling sweets. He does all the stablehands' jobs and then some.

“Careful,” She scolds when he nearly trips over a lead rope in his haste, “You’ll break your neck over nothing.”

But he lets out a short, breathless sound, and straightens up with the rope coiled neatly in his arms, “S-s-still g-g-good,” he manages, smiling so wide she half expects the top of his head to fall off. She has definitely accidentally eaten something that is currently making her hallucinate. It’s the only explanation.

By the third errand, Branwen finally halts, planting her fists on her hips, “Oi. Why are you smiling like that? It’s muck and buckets and rope.”

He ducks his head, still grinning, cheeks pink with exertion, or maybe something else. “J-j-j-just… g-good t-to—” His voice tangles, but he shrugs, eyes bright.

Branwen stares at him for a long moment, still baffled. She can’t fathom why hauling slop buckets or polishing tack should leave a man looking so damn pleased with himself. Most servants and stablehands drag their feet through this drudgery, grumble under their breath, do the bare minimum when her back is turned. Jonas, meanwhile, looks as though she’s invited him to some grand game.

She shakes her head, muttering under her breath, “...You must’ve hit your head or something.”

They end up side by side *again,* scrubbing troughs with their elbows nearly brushing. Branwen straightens from the trough, wiping her damp hands on her trousers. Jonas keeps scrubbing beside her, shoulders loose, face open in a way that startles her every time she catches it. The man looks as though he’s found his life’s calling in soap

suds and muck water.

She clicks her tongue, utterly exasperated, “If you’ve got so much spring left, you can put it to use on the horses later. Their coats are half dust by now.”

Jonas’s head lifts sharply, eyes lighting up as if she’s just offered him a crown. Before she’s even finished the sentence, he’s already half-risen, brushing off his knees, “I-I c-c-can—st-stalls,” he stammers, the words tumbling out in a rush, and then he’s gone, darting down the row like a boy loosed from lessons.

Moments later, Branwen hears it: the brisk swish of a brush moving in eager strokes, the muffled thump of Jonas’s boots, and the mare’s contented huff as if she, too, is surprised by his enthusiasm.

Branwen pauses, arms folded across her chest. She leans back and watches his back for a moment, the way he bends earnestly to the work, movements quick but careful. Lips pressing thin, she lets out a low breath. Too eager by half. He’s probably trying to make… something up to her, as if she needs it.

“Hopeless,” She mutters, though the word doesn’t land quite the way she intends.

Chapter End Notes

> Will Jonas ever get that fucking cake made? Tune in for the next thrilling installment of "Hey this Blorbo is Pretty Pathetic". Also no surprise Jonas also had a "I diagnose you as a submissive" moment in between him watching Arleth.
>
> Also screaming crying and throwing up. I never write maledom, but I wanted to write the implication of it just to emphasize how WRONG and UNNATURAL it is. Arleth's wife is whatever this

universe's version of hen-pecked is lmao.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The wind rolls steady across the wide fields, carrying with it the dry smell of sun-baked earth and the musk of horses. Branwen braces her knee against the side of a restless gelding while Brenna tugs at the stiff leather of an old harness, their hands working in rhythm. The straps groan as they tighten, the metal buckle biting shut. Brenna has a streak of dirt on her cheek and hums tunelessly, squinting against the glare.

Branwen glances up when the crunch of gravel intrudes on the quiet. A figure has appeared at the far end of the path, making his way toward them with the stiff carriage of a man who wants to be seen. Branwen straightens, eyes narrowing with one hand still resting on the horse's flank.

The closer the stranger comes, the worse he looks. His clothes are trying too hard: Layers of what must have been costly fabric once, though stitched together by clumsy hands. The jacket hangs uneven on his shoulders, one sleeve longer than the other, the lining puckering at the seams. The patterns fight each other like cockerels in a pit, plaids and florals jostling in a way no proper tailor would allow. His boots gleam with polish but the leather at the soles is chewed raw, and his gloves, clearly borrowed, sag loose around his fingers like empty sacks.

Branwen can't help it. Her mouth twitches. He's dressed like a child playing noble in a village pageant.

The stranger stops near the fence and Branwen finishes tying the gelding when he does a theatrical bow. He clears his throat and, with

an air of painful formality, and says, “Good day, madam. Might I inquire if this estate belongs to Lady Mirelda?”

Branwen lets out a short, derisive snort, trading a look with Brenna. The way he says Lady Mirelda— drawn out like a title on parade— screams false. No one local talks that way. Not the servants, not the visiting nobility, not anyone who actually belongs here. Either he’s a stranger to the land or a fool pretending to belong in it.

Besides, no one calls her *madam*.

Brenna leans closer, muttering under her breath, “Think he’s one of the Lady’s… visitors? You know, one of those gentlemen brought round for… company?” Her voice dips lower, “Upper-class sort of… companion?”

Branwen fixes the man with a flat, measuring look, then shakes her head, “Nah. He’s not her type.”

The man bows again, as though he’s rehearsed it in front of a mirror. When he speaks again, his voice swells with false flourish, “Ah, but fair madam, your estate radiates a nobility befitting the highest echelons of our Dominion’s esteemed society. Might I be granted passage to pay my respects to Lady Mirelda, bearer of grace and protector of her lands?”

Brenna coughs into her sleeve, trying to disguise a laugh.

Branwen lifts her brows, unimpressed. His crooked cuffs only make it more laughable, “Yeah. You’re not here for The Lady. She’d never take a lad who talks like he’s wooing a fencepost.”

Brenna snickers outright this time, shaking her head before heading off to another gelding, “Looks like he’s all hat and no cattle.”

The wind whips Branwen’s braid against her shoulder, and she keeps her eyes on the man, already half-certain of what he is: Not noble, not servant, but maybe something awkwardly lodged between.

Staunchly middle-class, she supposes.

The man adjusts the too-big gloves as though that might steady his performance. His eyes dart to Branwen’s unimpressed stare and some of the stiff, borrowed grandeur falters.

“Well,” He begins, puffing his chest, “Perhaps it would be, ah, remiss of me to… mislead such diligent stewards of this… noble ground,” His tone is still heavy with affectation, like he’s reading lines from a script, but there’s a crack of self-consciousness in it now. He shifts, bowing slightly deeper than needed, “In truth, madam, I do not come for the Lady.” He drops his voice, trying for solemn humility, “I come for one humbler than she.”

Branwen squints, “Is that so.”

“Indeed. I— I seek my kin. My brother,” He straightens, then lowers his head again with an exaggerated show of deference, “My name is Eliam Dale, of innkeeper’s stock, husband to Lina Dale of the Wayrest Tavern. And I come to see Jonas Ellery.”

This Eliam guy’s announcement hangs in the air, his words puffed up with all the pomp he can muster. Ellery. She’s never heard it before. It’s strange, hearing Jonas spoken of with a surname. It rings oddly in her head. It’s common, ordinary, tied to some unremarkable family who probably lived in some equally unremarkable town. But even that

sets a pang deep in her chest. For all her own pride and stubbornness, she has no such name to claim. No line to trace. Just Branwen of a Freehold village, from a farm that washed away years ago.

Her lips curl wryly.

“Well, isn’t that something,” She mutters, arms folding across her chest, “Jonas Ellery. Could’ve fooled me, the way he skulks about like a ghost. Almost thought he was also a Freeholder for a bit,” She tilts her head at Eliam, sharp as a hawk sizing up prey, “And what’s a brother like you want with him, then?”

There’s steel beneath her tone now, though her mind still turns over that name— *Jonas Ellery*— as if testing how it fits in her mouth, how it shapes the man who’s become an odd fixture in her kennels and stables. For a moment, she reminds herself that this could be another Jonas, but she keeps entertaining the idea.

“You’re telling me you’re kin to him?”

Eliam clasps his hands before him like he’s about to make an oath, “By birth and by bond, yes. My own flesh and blood. We share a mother’s hearth, though fate has seen our paths diverge. I am he who once shared his bread and blanket.”

She’s about to write him off again, some puffed-up pretender who’s learned Jonas’s name somewhere and wants to worm his way into the estate— But something in his face stops her. The set of his jaw, the slope of his nose, the way his eyes crease when the sun catches them.

Jonas is slighter, thinner, carved down by years of servant’s work and a careful sort of meekness. This one has more weight to him, shoulders padded by an easier life, cheeks fuller, hair oiled and fluffed

into a poor imitation of noble styling. But under the polish, under the strut and posturing, there's something undeniably familiar.

Branwen exhales slowly through her nose, "…Hells, I'll be damned. You do look like him…. If you stuffed him full of stews for a year and put his head in a goose's backside for grooming, maybe."

Eliam opens and closes his mouth. He clears his throat again, though colour climbs into his cheeks this time, "Ah— well. Resemblance does run in the blood, even if fortune… dresses us differently. Might I be granted the grace of seeing him?"

Branwen regards him with an unamused arch of her brow. This is no market square or tavern threshold where folk wander in and out. The estate is a fortress of routines and permissions, and despite trying to act like whatever he thinks nobles are like, Eliam clearly has no notion of the machinery that governs it. He's playing at civility, but he's blundered straight into the wrong stage.

"Granted? That's not how it works here."

She knows how things run, if not in the grand halls then at least in the yards and kennels. Even the stablehands, low as they are, can't have cousins or sweethearts traipsing in on a whim. Forms must be filled, signatures taken, a steward's nod given. Branwen herself must vouch for anyone stepping past the threshold.

"You didn't come through the Housekeeper-General, did you? No papers, no permissions, no announcement," She jerks her chin toward the looming house in the near distance, "You don't just waltz up to a door like that and demand your brother. Not here. He's likely inside mopping up someone else's boot scuffs. But if you think you'll have yourself a proper visit, you're already out of luck. The Lady's house doesn't run on family reunions."

Eliam blinks at her, his composure visibly fraying further, “Surely— it would be no great offence if I were to simply present myself at the door? Announce myself plainly? It is only my brother I wish to see. Surely, they would understand—”

“You’ll be lucky if you make it halfway up the steps. Knock on that door without a steward’s mark beside your name and they won’t even bother to ask your business. They’ll toss you back down the stairs and tell you to be grateful you kept your teeth.”

More colour creeps onto Eliam’s cheeks as he fidgets with the seams of his coat, muttering under his breath about “presentation” and “proper bearing.” The words come dressed in that same borrowed noble cadence, but it falters now, thinning whenever his nerves break through. Branwen sees more brotherly resemblances. Jonas wears his meekness plain as day, draped across him like a garment he never learned to take off. Eliam, though— he hides his behind a gloss of borrowed manners, polished boots, the kind of flourishes a tavern mirror might teach a man.

Still, when his eyes flick side to side, when his shoulders fold a hair’s breadth inward under the weight of her words, she sees the truth of it. They are cut from the same threadbare cloth, only woven into different shapes.

At last, he dips his head, more a half-step backwards than a bow. “As you say, madam,” The cadence wavers one last time, cracking in the middle, before he turns on his heel. His boots scuff the dirt as he trudges back the way he came, every step slower than the one before, as if his thoughts are already circling toward defiance. He looks for all the world like a man walking away while scheming how best to return.

Branwen exhales sharply through her nose, a faint huff that might

have been a laugh if there were any humour in it, “This isn’t going to end well.”

Jonas walks with his head bowed, a half-damp, footprint-marked copy of the *Genteel Standard* trembling faintly in his hands as he reads while he goes. The air is already warm, early summer clinging close, and the gravel crunches under his shoes as he makes his way down the familiar path.

THE GENTEEL STANDARD
Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661
Issue No. 3,176 – Early Summer Edition

FEATURE: ‘The Quiet Bloom of Husbandry’

The Standard recommends refreshing your marital arrangements with a focus on seasonal submission.

“Just as flowers lean toward sunlight,” Says etiquette maven Matron Halberdine of Bellrowe, “A husband must lean into silence. Especially during times of political unrest.” Her latest pamphlet, “The Soft-Spoken Spouse: A Floral Metaphor,” encourages daily posture drills and garden kneeling to foster humility.

One new tip? Practice “Gratitude Stillness” at dawn— fifteen uninterrupted minutes of kneeling on pebbles in reflection of your wife's daily burdens. The finest households are adopting it.

MANNERS & MORALS: “What If He Raises His Voice?”

Excerpt from the National Moral Code for Male Conduct

Should a man raise his voice in disagreement, remember:

- *This is not an act of strength, but a cry for firm leadership.*
- Avoid shaming him in public— simply cup his chin gently and whisper, “That’s enough now, sweetheart.”
- If outburst frequency exceeds once monthly, consider a temporary verbal diet (no speech except in song or prayer).

HOUSEHOLD ADVICE: From Pantry to Parlour

A new trend sweeping manor kitchens: “Emotive Baking”— encouraging husbands to express their anxieties via subtle flour designs. A lopsided tart may indicate fear of disapproval. A cracked biscuit? Likely unresolved maternal guilt.

IN SOCIETY: A Most Fortunate Match

Lady Marleigh of Norrwyn has taken her seventh husband, a sweet-tempered village baker aged just nineteen. His modest gift— a poem embroidered into his own pillowcase— was declared “a triumph of textile devotion.” At the wedding, he wept for three hours. “It was the proper thing,” he said.

EDUCATION: Discipline for the Modern Boy

The Department of Male Refinement has approved new guidelines for early emotional softening.
Effective immediately:

- *All boys over the age of eight must complete at least one apology journal per quarter.*

- Boys demonstrating stubborn or assertive temperaments may be enrolled in Obedience Immersion Programs, where they are surrounded by louder, more competent women for up to 48 hours at a time.

- "Let the feminine lead," says Senior Matron Hollis, "And the boy will follow."

ADVICE COLUMN: Ask Matron Lys

Q: My husband tried to correct me about a historical fact at supper. What do I do?
A: Remove his belt. Not in punishment, of course— in reassurance. Tell him, "You no longer need to carry the weight of being right."

Bonus Insert: "5 Signs Your Husband Is Developing Pride (And How to Stop It Cold)"
Includes recommended herbal teas and guided guilt meditations.

His eyes linger on the "Emotive Baking" section. Jonas wonders how much of his anxieties have been on full display on his two failed honey-cakes. Perhaps it's best that Branwen never saw either, because she surely would have seen all his flaws in the flour. But even with that belittling thought, it doesn't make the cakes being taken away from him any less bitter, nor does it take away his desire to actually get something for her eventually.

Jonas mulls over the ridiculous prose of the *Standard* a little longer

until he pauses at the entrance to the kennels, as he always does. The doorway gapes dark before him, the scent of hay and hound already drifting out, and habit pulls him to stillness. He folds the paper and presses against his chest as he draws a quiet breath. He thinks over the silent chant—

Salt to heel, smoke to brow—

“Your brother showed up yesterday.”

The words cut straight across his thought.

Jonas startles, nearly dropping the *Standard*. Branwen is leaning against the fencepost just inside the yard, arms crossed and her braid heavy against her shoulder. She says it as though she’s mentioning the weather, flat and without ceremony, though her eyes don’t leave him. The candidness makes him think he must’ve misheard.

His throat works soundlessly. The paper trembles again in his grip.

“Tall fellow, bit of hair puffed up like a rooster. Talks like he’s play-acting some noble farce. Said he was looking for you.”

Jonas blinks, his mouth opening, then closing again. He clutches the *Standard* tighter, the muddy black letters suddenly swimming on the page.

“Jacket was too fine for the likes of him, but the stitching was off. Home-made, not tailor. Gloves too big. Boot soles near worn through, though he’d polished them like a mirror. Looked a bit like you if you’d been stuffed with extra bread at supper for a month straight.” Her

mouth quirks at the corner, “Called me ‘madam.’”

The words prick at him, sharp as nettles, one after another. A memory stirs—

Eliam at the edge of their narrow bed, squinting against weak candlelight. Their father’s old shirts had been torn apart and re-stitched into something resembling a vestcoat, the seams puckered, thread pulling uneven where Eliam’s hand had tugged too tight. He’d draped it across his shoulders with a flourish, then added a cracked leather belt to hide the worst of the bunching. Jonas, small and gap-toothed, had laughed until Eliam cuffed him lightly on the ear. But then Eliam, with all the solemnity of a lord addressing his household, had bowed low and said, *“Your servant, milord Jonas.”* A sort of warmth that became rarer as they grew older, with Jonas’s stutter becoming more apparent and Eliam becoming more preoccupied with ideas of courtship and marriage.

Jonas had giggled so hard he’d nearly fallen off the bed. And yet, beneath the game, he’d sensed something heavier. Eliam’s hands were always busy tearing and mending. Always trying to smooth the rough edges of their lives into something finer, something worthy. Pretending, because pretending was better than despairing.

Now, with Branwen’s description ringing in his ears, the image comes back too clearly: the too-big gloves, the proud stance covering frayed seams, the act so carefully rehearsed it almost seemed real to him. Jonas swallows hard.

He thinks of the letters. Ink pressed hard into the page, but weeks and months passing with nothing behind them. How about I visit to see how you are! In fact, I’m packing my bags in between writing this letter. Just wait, I’ll be there in no time. Words like that have never held before.

The idea that Eliam might truly be here now, somewhere, makes Jonas's stomach knot. There's a flicker of something warm, even glad — but tangled through with unease, like nettles woven into cloth.

When he glances up, Branwen is watching him closely. Her eyes narrow just a fraction, her mouth set in a way that's less sharp than usual, though he can't tell why. She studies him the way she studies a restless horse, weighing whether it'll bolt or settle.

Then, quiet and blunt, she asks, "Do you even want to see him?"

The question lands like a stone in Jonas's chest. He has no answer. He's never once thought of it as a choice.

Jonas opens his mouth, then shuts it again. His fingers tighten on the folded *Standard* until the pages crinkle, "I—I d-don't… I m-mean, he —" He gives a helpless shrug, eyes fixed on the packed dirt by his boots, "M-maybe."

It sounds pitiful in his own ears, thin and uncertain, nothing like the firm eagerness that carried him through the stables with sacks of oats just a few weeks ago.

Branwen lets out a quiet snort, "That's an answer that isn't an answer."

He shifts his weight, embarrassed, "He—he s-said he'd c-come before. N-never did. So… I d-don't know."

"Guess he finally meant it this time."

“M-maybe,” He glances at her, he can’t tell if she’s pressing him or letting him off, “If h-he’s here, t-then… h-he’s here.”

Branwen tilts her head, eyes narrowing a little, like she hears what he isn’t saying. Then she straightens, brushing dust from her sleeve, “Well. I assume household staff need to go through Maud for that sort of thing. Signatures and all that. Judging by both him and you, that hasn’t been done. So he might’ve been kicked off sometime yesterday for all we know. I guess you should keep an eye on your mail cubby to find out if he’s still around.”

Jonas nods, grateful for the shift, though the knot in his chest remains.

“…I’ve fields to be in. Stablehands don’t wait on pebbles or stillness.”

The way she says it, gruff and casual, feels like more than dismissal. Like a marker set down. He hears the shape of it: if the thought of his brother weighs too heavy, he’ll know where to find her.

It makes him feel funny in his chest. He nods again and Branwen leaves him to his own devices. He places the *Standard* on a nearby bench when he enters the kennels side of the building. He has work to do: Animal waste and pens won’t clean themselves. It’s work he knows, work that holds him together when his thoughts want to scatter.

He takes up the broom, bristles worn uneven, and drags it across the kennel stones. The scrape of straw and the faint shift of dust is steady and predictable. He gathers the leavings into the pan, tips them into the bin. One task folds into another: water buckets emptied and scrubbed, feed measured, troughs checked. His body remembers the rhythm, muscle and habit guiding him where his thoughts cannot. It

keeps his hands busy and breath measured.

Still, here and there, an image slips through. Branwen's wry mouth as she described Eliam's boots. The imagined bow, the noble cadence Eliam no doubt forced into his voice. The old memory of candlelight and his brother's too-tight stitches.

Jonas shakes the thought off. No use dwelling. Eliam has surely already gone. A guard would've told him off by now. No written permission, no entry, that's the rule. Branwen was right about that. Better to believe Eliam's been turned away, trudged off down the road. Better to think he won't see him again until some other day, some other time.

Jonas scrubs at the floorboards of the tack rooms until they gleam damp under his hand. The work wears at his shoulders, but it keeps his head bowed, keeps him from glancing toward the door, and keeps him from waiting.

Hours pass. His days at the stables and kennels are always the most labour intensive, yet Jonas is thankful he's the only housestaff that is usually scheduled here at a time. He doesn't want to think about what would happen if someone like Merrill and Fenn were put on mucking duty with him at this point.

Jonas straightens from the straw pile, wiping his palms down the front of his apron.

Then he hears something.

It's faint, too faint. A rustle, like a foot dragging across hay. The kennels are never quiet for long, but there are no animals or stablehands here right now and this noise isn't the usual shuffle of

paws or creak of timber. He stills.

A step. Soft, deliberate.

Jonas's breath quickens. He glances at a doorway nearby, the threshold darkened by a lean slice of shadow. His heart jolts. Did he do something wrong at the Shadow Crossing? Spirits and fair folk latch on that way, slip through with you, steal your tongue if you're careless. Had he done it? He racks his brain, palms damp, suddenly sure he has.

A cold shiver needles up his spine. He stutters a quick apology under his breath, to the fair ones, to the shades, to anything listening.

Then— Arms wrap around him. Jonas lurches forward with a strangled sound, a muffled yelp that breaks halfway into his stammer. He thrashes instinctively, heart slamming and breath shallow. But the hold is solid, not ghostly. A chest presses against his back, steady and human.

"Jonas!" Comes the bright voice, roughened with feeling, "There you are! By the gods, look at you! Only just a bit half-starved. You're taller, though still a sprig, I'll say that much."

Jonas freezes. He twists, half-panicked, half-hungry for confirmation, and finds himself staring up at Eliam. Older, broader, face worn by years, but those eyes— Still the same.

His breath catches in his throat. Relief bursts hot in his chest, but right on its heels comes something else: dread, confusion, the memory of being sent away from home at twelve, of everything Eliam's sudden appearance means.

He doesn't know whether to cling tighter or wrench himself free. His fingers twitch uselessly against his brother's sleeve, caught between welcome and resistance, joy and shame. His mouth works soundlessly, but no words come, only the stuttered rhythm of his breath.

It has been years. Years without this embrace and without the echo of family. And now, here Eliam stands, holding him and speaking as though no time has passed at all.

"I told you I'd make it, didn't I? Lina said I wouldn't, but here I am. Packed up and set out before she could stop me. You wouldn't believe how dull the road is. Fields and fields of nothing, except for one hawker swearing her cart's wheels were square. She near had me convinced."

Jonas swallows. His brother's words crash over him in waves, one tumbling into the next, giving him no space to find his footing. All he can think of is the letter, the coins, and the tinctures. His stomach knots. He can already hear Eliam asking if he tried them, if they helped. He sees Branwen's cake in his mind— first never properly made, second confiscated— his brother's money spent on flour and spices he no longer has. Shame prickles hot at the back of his neck.

"Y-you…" Jonas manages, his voice thin, "Y-you r-really—"

"Really came, yes!" Eliam grins, pulling back just enough to grip Jonas's shoulders and look him over, "Didn't I say I would? And here I am. You didn't doubt me, did you?"

Jonas presses his lips together, unable to answer. Of course he doubted. He always doubted.

But Eliam barrels on, “Tell me, how’s the work? Are they paying you decent? Eating enough? Not getting knocked about too much, I hope, because if you are—” He cuts himself off with a quick laugh, shaking his head, “Never mind. You’d never tell me. Always keeping things buttoned up tight.”

Then Eliam’s chatter falters, “Right, I need to be quiet. Wouldn’t want the guards of the estate to catch me. I foolishly didn’t realize I needed permission to be on the grounds so I’ve been trying my best to sneak, which I know isn’t proper and how else will I see you?” He makes a dramatic flourish of studying his surroundings, “I wasn’t sure if that brutish woman was still around. But I think we’re alone. Good! We can catch up, then!”

Taking a better look at him, Jonas sees bramble and leaves on Eliam’s mismatched coat. Has he been hiding in the shrubbery?

Eliam’s eyes catch on the *Standard* where it lies half-crumpled on the bench. He stoops, dusts it off with the back of his hand, and lets out a delighted little laugh.

“Oh, this one!” He smooths the page and jabs a finger at a column, “Gratitude Stillness. You read this, Jonas? Fifteen uninterrupted minutes of kneeling on pebbles in reflection of your wife’s daily burdens,” He beams, puffing up a bit, “I’ve been doing that. Properly, mind. Lina says it’s useless, that I’d do her more good cooking the porridge or hanging the laundry instead of kneeling about like a penitent rooster. But that’s her way of seeing it. The genteel folk—Well, they know better, don’t they? They make a man better. Imagine, every day beginning with such stillness, such order.”

Eliam falls into talk easily, as though they’ve been apart for hours, not years. His voice is full of that same buoyant confidence Jonas remembers from childhood, though now it carries a certain practiced mimicry, those little echoes of genteel phrasing and posture that sit strangely on him. Jonas is sure his brother is more casual with him,

but when Eliam was speaking with Branwen yesterday, that mimicry must've been multiplied tenfold.

"You wouldn't believe the pace of it at the inn. Lina has us full every other night. Merchants on the road, pilgrims, even a few matrons and their retinues. She's the one who runs the accounts, of course, but I keep the hearth and rooms spotless. Cook the suppers, make sure there's always fresh bread on the table. They've started calling me the steward— that's what one of the regulars said. You can see it, can't you? Suits me better than 'innkeeper's help.' Some days, if you close your eyes, you could mistake us for landed folk."

Jonas makes a vague sound in his throat and crouches down by the kennel door. He gathers a pail and brush, the familiar work now only just barely grounding him.

Eliam doesn't notice the lack of reply. He's too busy warming to his own story, "Lina says I'm better at keeping the place than half the husbands in the town, but she doesn't like me hearing that too much, says it'll get to my head. Still, I've got a knack for it. Floors gleam, Jonas. You could eat your supper right off the planks and not think twice. And the stews! I've learned a dozen ways with turnips alone. Meatless, but you wouldn't know it if I didn't tell you. Folk come back for those meals, I swear they do."

Jonas dips the brush into the pail, water sloshing against the sides. He scrubs at the worn stone floor, nodding at intervals, though his brother hardly needs encouragement.

"Course, it isn't all drudgery. We get our fair share of important guests. Not nobles exactly, but genteel enough in bearing. You can tell by the way they speak, the way they expect things done just so. I mind myself around them. Stand straighter. Lina says I puff up like a rooster, but isn't that what they want? A proper househusband knows how to present himself. It's what sets us apart."

Jonas pauses, brush dripping in his hand. He doesn't correct him, doesn't point out that wiping tables and polishing mugs isn't quite the same as an upperclass ceremony. He only goes back to scrubbing, the rasp of bristles against stone filling the space where his words might have been.

But Eliam carries on, unbothered, "You'd like it, I think. No kennels, no muck. Just warmth, food, and routine. You'd have your own corner, maybe even your own chair by the fire. Folk'd see you as someone who belongs."

Jonas swallows, the thought lodging like a pebble in his chest. He pushes the brush harder against the stone, watching the suds spread thin. He nods again, not trusting himself to say anything.

Eliam doesn't notice the silence. He's already moved on, spinning another tale of the inn as if it were a manor-house, his voice bright and proud and filling every corner of the empty kennels.

"You'd have liked Hearthurn at the inn this year," He says brightly, "I convinced Lina to let me do a little something. I baked sweet loaves. Lina said the spice was heavy, but the merchants ate every crumb. We hung the old wreath too, the one from when we were boys. I told the guests about it, said it was tradition. Made it sound genteel," His grin spreads wide, "They believed me. You should've seen their faces, Jonas."

Jonas doesn't say what Hearthurn was like for him, fumbling attempts and failure that never reached Branwen's hands. The shame sits too hot in his chest.

"You'd make a good husband, quiet as you are. Remember when I

mentioned Lina's cousin? Just imagine it, you'd have respect. Meals at a real table. Your own room. Not this…" He waves a hand at the kennels, straw and dust swirling in the air as he once again mentions how much better it can be for Jonas, apparently.

Jonas feels his throat tighten. Shame had flooded first but now it's something harder, frustration prickling beneath it. He had not seen his brother in years, and now this is what Eliam brings. Smiles and boasts and half-thoughtless digs that cut sharper than they should. He knows his brother means well but— but he fits here, despite how hard it can be. He might even enjoy it now and then, especially with the days he spends with Branwen and when he doesn't come across Merrill or Fenn.

"I… I l-like it h-here," He manages, voice small and strained, "W-well en—enough."

The words sound small and fragile. A defence that doesn't convince even him. He keeps his eyes low, fixed on the stones he has already swept clean.

Eliam tilts his head, eyes narrowing at the sound of Jonas's broken words, "Darn, I almost thought I misheard you, the way you swallowed that sentence. You still—" He gestures vaguely at his own mouth, "—trip over yourself like before?"

Jonas stiffens. His shoulders tighten as if he could shield himself with silence.

Eliam pushes on, not cruelly, but with the blunt persistence of an older brother who thinks he knows what's best, "Did you ever buy those tinctures I sent coin for? Like I said, the seller swore her brother was near-fluent within a season. It'd give you a fair chance. Make things easier. You could hold a conversation, present yourself

properly. Think what doors would open for you if you didn't have to wrestle every word out."

Jonas's chest tightens. He'd been waiting for this, the question dangling like a hook since the moment Eliam walked through the gates. He presses his lips together, staring at some corner in the kennels. His mouth feels dry.

"I… I d-didn't," He finally says, voice quiet, almost drowned by the rattle of the kennel door in the breeze. He doesn't explain further. Doesn't say the coin was swallowed by flour and honey and spices, all for cakes that never reached the hands they were meant for.

Eliam lets out a small breath through his nose, not surprised, "Figured as much." He pats the side of his coat, then pulls something from within. A small glass vial, stoppered with wax, liquid inside a murky amber. He holds it out with a grin, "Lucky for you, I brought one along. Didn't want to leave it to chance. Here. Try it. No harm in trying, right?"

Jonas blinks at the bottle. When Eliam presses it closer, Jonas instinctively lifts a hand, and suddenly the vial is sitting cold and fragile in his palm.

He stares down at it. The glass catches the dull light, the liquid inside shifting thickly when he tilts it. It feels heavier than it should, weighted with everything Eliam believes it means— that inside this bottle is a cure, a future, a worthiness Jonas doesn't know if he can ever reach. He only holds it, silent, the kennel air pressing close and damp around them.

Jonas lowers his gaze to the label, squinting through the smudged glass. The ink is gaudy and looping, overblown letters stamped in a faded blue that tries and fails to look dignified.

“Dr. Calvess’s Peerless Elixir,” it reads in stiff script. Below that, in smaller lines crammed together like a market crier’s promises:

"For the curing of speech defects, stammers, and stutters; the easing of male frailty and lack of vigour; the sharpening of wit; the soothing of nerves; the balancing of humours; and the restoration of household harmony."

A crude drawing of a man’s face sits beside the words. His chin sharp as a wedge, smile dazzling, his mouth wide open as though mid-speech. His cheeks are ruddy and his hair curled in a style Jonas recognises from the back pages of the *Genteel Standard,* where every advertisement seems to promise that a man can be made whole if only he spends the right coin.

At the bottom of the label, there’s a final flourish in bold letters, *“Speak Clearly, Serve Nobly, Live Proudly.”*

Jonas feels his stomach turn. Even he can tell it’s nonsense. The words are piled so thick they mean nothing, a saleswoman’s chant that has no weight in the real world. Yet here it sits in his hand, slick and amber, with Eliam watching him expectantly as though he’s holding salvation.

Jonas lifts his eyes at last, meeting Eliam’s gaze. His brother is grinning, all pride and eagerness, the way he always has been when he thinks he’s found an answer for Jonas. There’s no guile there, no cruelty; only a clumsy, wholehearted desire to help. And yet it knots Jonas’s chest all the tighter.

He nods once, small and meek, fingers curling around the bottle though it feels heavy, too heavy for what it is. The words on the label still echo in his head, hollow as a tin bell.

Eliam claps him on the shoulder, oblivious to the storm in him, “That’s settled, then. You’ll see, Jonas. A bit of patience, a few swallows, and you’ll be speaking like a proper man. I’m looking forward to it— looking forward to the whole day, truth be told. I know you’ve work to do and I need to avoid any guards, but it’ll be you and me, together again.”

Jonas tries to summon a smile but it sits crooked on his lips, too thin. He wants to feel glad, wants to share Eliam’s brightness. Instead, all that comes is an ache, the restless wish to be alone with a bucket and brush, where the work is simple and doesn’t twist him up inside.

Still, he nods again, as if agreement is enough. Because what else can he do? Eliam’s arm squeezes around his shoulders, warm and solid, while Jonas stands there with the bottle in his hands and the weight of conflicting emotions pressed tight against his ribs.

Branwen leans against the fence post, arms crossed, watching the morning sun shift over the fields. The wind tugs at her braid and the faint scent of hay drifts up from the kennels. She should be checking the mares in the fields, but for a moment she just lets herself watch the light scatter across the grass as the stablehands muck around and try catching up with a runaway hound.

She can’t help the faint twinge of envy that twists in her chest when she thinks of Jonas having a family. Someone who comes for him, who knows him, who apparently cares enough to travel to see him. It’s more than what she’s ever tried to do. She shakes her head, muttering under her breath. Lucky sods. She should be glad, she tells herself. She is. But it’s complicated, like so much else in her life.

Her gaze narrows as she thinks of Eliam. Him, she thinks, and the warmth in her chest cools just a fraction. The resemblance to Jonas is there— enough to make her pause— but everything else sets her on edge. He fumbles with his words, tries too hard to be genteel, wears airs that feel foreign and forced. He's not Jonas. He's not… simple. Not in the way Jonas is. Not in the way she likes.

Still, she can't quite shake the small, grudging amusement that creeps in at his attempts to mimic the upper-class airs he clearly admires. She watches him with narrowed eyes, trying not to smirk, and thinks of her own sisters— How she once called them traitors, and how a part of her fears that one day the years will leave their faces and voices unreachable in her memory. It's strange to feel both irritation and something regretful at the same time.

She shakes her head again, tightening her braid with one hand. Eliam's fine, I suppose. Let him fuss over his little brother. Yet in the back of her mind, she can't quite stop herself from wondering what it's like to have a family still be around. It's a small, sharp pang of longing she swallows down, along with a sigh that smells faintly of hay and wind.

She nudges herself upright, brushing dust from her sleeve. That hound needs catching. The mares need feeding. And in the midst of it all, she reminds herself that some things— some people— are not hers to worry about. Not yet. Not ever.

"So—" Eliam gestures vaguely as Jonas slowly finishes his last chore in the kennels and stables, "Where are your friends, then?"

"M-my…?" Jonas says, blinking, caught off guard.

“Your friends,” Eliam repeats, his gaze sweeping the yard outside as though expecting them to appear on cue, “You’ve been here years, haven’t you? You must’ve made some by now. A circle, you know? People who look out for you.”

The silence stretches, and in it he can almost hear the empty corners of the servants’ quarters: the narrow bunks, the low hum of conversation that always stops when he passes, the battered footlockers pressed close. The corridor lamps gutter, casting hollow pools of light on worn floors, and there is never a knock on the wall near his cot, never a shared cup in the common hall. Only his own footsteps.

“I… I w-work,” He finally murmurs, the stutter a frayed thread snagging on every syllable.

Eliam lets out a short laugh, easy and warm in tone but still cutting in its implication, “Yes, but you must do something else. You can’t be all work, Jonas.”

The words prickle under Jonas’s skin. He thinks of Branwen crouched among the hounds or hauling oats with him, the ease she inspires, the way her presence feels protective, almost spiritual. He remembers her hand brushing his once when they lifted a hay bale together, the heat that lingered long after. Could he consider her a friend? Would she consider him one? The thought ties itself in a knot of longing and self-doubt, and he shifts the tincture and the cleaning supplies he’s been holding, as though weighing them against the question itself.

Eliam notices and leans forward, a grin tugging at his lips, “Ah, errands. I can carry some of that, you know. Guests shouldn’t be idle while you—”

Jonas shakes his head gently, “N-no, n-no… g-g-guests sh–shouldn’t

do… w-work," he says. His voice is almost embarrassed, but firm enough to stop Eliam. He can feel the heat rising in his cheeks, part shame, part the strange, fluttering hope of getting inside the house soon. Eliam will not be able to follow him there and yet— part of him wants the day to stretch longer, to have the brotherly company without the work, even if that's impossible.

Eliam raises his hands, palms outward, conceding the point though the grin lingers, "Very well, then. You lead, Jonas. I'll follow. And hide in the bushes if needed. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten about the guards."

Jonas inhales slowly, the cool summer air filling his chest. The tincture, the brushes, the rags, they're heavy, but his own sense of purpose presses heavier. He nods once, almost imperceptibly, and exits the kennels and begins to move toward the long path towards the main house, Eliam falling into step beside him.

His brother's stride is confident, shoulders squared even in the worn coat, boots clicking smartly against the stones. Jonas feels his own steps in contrast. They're smaller, quieter, practiced to leave little trace. He wonders if Eliam notices. He wonders if Eliam approves, or if the proud tilt of his chin hides disappointment.

But when Jonas dares a glance, Eliam isn't frowning. His gaze is fixed on Jonas himself, measuring, yes, but also strangely fond. There's…. pride there. It unsettles Jonas more than reproach would. He lowers his eyes quickly, guilty for the tiny flutter of warmth it sparks in his chest.

He isn't enthusiastic. But there is a quiet, tense anticipation, a strange tightness in his chest at the thought of Eliam watching, wanting to understand him. Jonas isn't sure he deserves that kind of watching. He isn't sure he can bear it.

Jonas turns the corner, the tincture and cleaning supplies balanced carefully in his arms. For a fleeting moment, he imagines the day going smoothly, just him and Eliam making their slow way toward the house and him eventually saying goodbye to his brother and not feeling entirely bad about everything. Perhaps Eliam will still be around tomorrow, avoiding guards and hiding in behind trees.

Then— thud. Someone smacks into his shoulder with unexpected force.

The moment jerks him off balance. The brushes and rags tumble from his hands. The tincture slips from the pile, hitting the stones with a sharp clink before it cracks, a fine web of glass spreading across the sunlit path.

“A-Ah!” Jonas stammers, instinctively dropping to his knees to scoop up the fragments of glass, but there’s no time to dwell.

“Watch where you’re going,” Drawls a familiar sneer. Jonas freezes. Merrill. Fenn. Both smirking, eyes bright with that careless, cruel amusement that always seems to find him.

“Oops,” Fenn adds, voice sweet and false, “Didn’t mean to ruin your… errand.”

Merrill tilts his head, eyes glittering with mock sympathy, “So clumsy, Jonas. Careful, or we’ll have to carry you everywhere.”

Eliam, already standing halfway in a bush in some botched attempt to hide, frowns in confusion, then smiles broadly and steps forward with a flourish as if he understands everything. Jonas watches him change. In an instant his voice lifts, smoothed over into an imitation of genteel polish.

“Ah, what splendid companions you have! How very considerate of you to assist my dear little brother,” he says, bowing slightly in the manner he’s been practising for months, voice dripping with unearned admiration.

Jonas swallows, cheeks burning, “N-n-no… they’re… they’re not—”

But Eliam is already clasping his hands together, nodding like he’s just witnessed an act of kindness, “How fortunate you are, Jonas!”

Jonas glances down at the shards of glass, the tincture ruined, and the spilled cleaning supplies, his stomach tightening. He wants to explain, to protest, but the words stick in his throat. Merrill snickers again, Fenn eyes Eliam down with a flat look, and the sound presses against him like a weight.

He shifts uncomfortably, unsure whether to stand up and step around them or just curl into himself. Eliam, however, is still smiling at the pair, entirely misreading the scene, and Jonas realizes with a sinking feeling that he’s the only one who knows the truth— and the only one who will have to deal with the aftermath.

Jonas scrambles forward, voice tight, trying to steer his brother away before anything else can happen, “E-Eliam… p-please… w-w-we sh-should go…”

Eliam, however, has already crouched down and is gathering the scattered brushes and rags, clearly expecting the others to lend a hand, “Come now, gentlemen,” He says politely, glancing at Merrill and Fenn, “Surely you would help—”

Merrill's expression suddenly twists, "What, you've got a guest now? Since when? Nothing's been written on the chart and no one's been notified you'd be busy with friends."

Fenn sneers, "Wow. Sleeping with the Hunting Marshal to earn her little favours, are we? She can make Maud turn a blind eye to you breaking rules, is that it? While everyone else still has to write for permission? You're a regular little whore, aren't you?"

Jonas's breath catches hard in his throat. The word whore lands like a slap, and though it isn't the first time he's heard it hissed in dark corners, the sound of it spoken in front of Eliam makes his ears burn hot with humiliation. He returns to curling over the shards, fingers shaking as he tries to sweep them into a rag before anyone can see his face.

Eliam stills. His easy smile falters. He looks between them, confusion deepening into something sharper, "Excuse me?" His tone is still smooth, still polite, but there's an edge now.

Merrill rolls his eyes, nudging Fenn's arm, "Oh, haven't you heard? Everyone knows Jonas is the Hunting Marshal's little pet. She covers for him. Lets him get away with things the rest of us would be caned for."

Jonas flinches, words lodged painfully in his throat. He wants to deny it, to say it isn't true, but his tongue is a knot. He can't give them the satisfaction of his stutter, not with Eliam watching.

Eliam's jaw tightens. He straightens, brushing dirt from his knees, and when he speaks again his voice has dropped, the polish giving way to something closer to his natural cadence, "My brother surely earns his keep."

The statement is bold, confident, and utterly untrue. Jonas knows it, Merrill knows it, Fenn knows it, but Eliam says it like scripture, and the certainty in his voice makes both boys hesitate.

Merrill recovers first, smirking as if the words roll right off, “Still looks like favouritism to me.” He jerks his chin toward Jonas, hunched on the glass and now clutching a rag from the cleaning supplies, trying desperately to wipe up the mess before the tincture stains, “Look at him. Can’t even keep hold of a bottle.”

The sting of it makes Jonas’s chest clench. He presses the rag down too hard, feels glass bite into his palm, and hisses softly at the pain.

“Jonas,” Eliam crouches again, ignoring Merrill and Fenn entirely now, and gently prises the rag from his brother’s hand. There’s blood welling on the heel of Jonas’s palm, “Leave it. You’ll only cut yourself worse.”

Jonas can’t meet his eyes. His cheeks burn— at the wound, at the broken glass, at Eliam seeing him like this.

Fenn snorts.

“Who knew having a stammer would do you so many favours. Must be nice.”

Eliam rises, straightening to his full height, and fixes Merrill with a smile that doesn’t reach his eyes, “You must excuse us. I’d hate to delay your very important… standing about.”

There's weight in his words— mockery hidden under courtesy— and for a moment Jonas can hardly believe it's his brother saying them. Merrill's smirk wavers, though only slightly.

Fenn spits on the stones near Jonas's knee, "Don't trip again, Knotjaw," The two of them saunter off, laughing low and mean, their footsteps fading toward the yard.

Silence presses in. Jonas stays crouched, shoulders hunched with the rag clutched tight. He knows Eliam will speak, knows he'll ask questions Jonas can't answer, or worse, try to console him.

Instead, Eliam kneels again, quietly picks up the cleaning supplies on the floor, and places it gently on top of a pile, "Come on," He says, softer now, "Something tells me you'd rather return to those kennels instead of going to the house."

Jonas nods mutely and gathers what's left. His chest is tight with conflicting things— humiliation, relief, anger, and an ache that feels dangerously close to gratitude. He keeps his eyes down as they walk, clutching the brushes and rags close as though they're worth more than gold. His palm is raw from the scrape of glass, but he hides it, curling his fist tight. The summer air presses heavy, and even once they step back into the shade of the kennels, he feels smothered.

Eliam hovers, restless. He tries to lean against a stall door, then thinks better of it, straightening again. "Jonas," He says carefully, "Those men, what they said… It wasn't right."

Jonas mutters, "I-It… it's f-fine."

"Fine?" Eliam gives a small, incredulous laugh, "The tincture I brought you—" His voice drops, pained, "It's gone now. And they

broke it, not you. That wasn't your fault."

Jonas presses the rag harder into his palm, the sting in his skin easier to bear than the tightness in his chest.

Eliam steps closer, "Do they often do this? To you?"

Jonas's silence answers well enough.

"I see," Eliam murmurs, his expression twisting. He tries again, his tone brightening in that false, hopeful way, "Well, I'll think of something better than that tincture. Something that lasts. You'll see. We'll fix your stutter and then Lina's cousi—"

Jonas's head jerks up, eyes flashing with frustration, "It c-can't b-be f-fixed," he blurts, the words tumbling jagged. The outburst stuns even him, leaving his breath caught.

Eliam blinks, caught off guard, "Jonas…"

Before either can say more, bootsteps crunch behind them.

"You both look miserable."

Branwen squints at Jonas, but before he can ruminate on how she's looking at him, Eliam clears his throat, puffing himself up, and steps neatly between them.

“There was,” His cadence changes and says with the self-importance of a man announcing scandal, “Mention of a Hunting Marshal,” He turns to Branwen, bowing stiffly, as if they stand in a parlour and not the dust and reek of kennels, “Might you know of her, madam?”

Branwen blinks, bemused, “You’re looking at her.”

The words hit Eliam like a cymbal crash. His posture snaps upright, eyes wide with revelation, and he points a triumphant finger at her, “Ha! Then it is you!”

Eliam barrels forward, red-faced, words rolling like a rehearsed speech gone sideways before Jonas can even react to anything.

“Madam! I must protest! You—yes, you—have, I dare say, absconded with my brother’s *honour!”*

Branwen stares, “What.”

Jonas goes crimson from collar to ears, “E-Eliam, n-no, it’s n-not—”

But Eliam, flushed with purpose, pushes on, “Do not mistake me! I’ve no quarrel with your station, your— your evident prowess with beasts and blades, nor your goodly influence upon the estate. But Jonas is young, gentle, and—” He falters a beat, his noble diction fraying as he gestures helplessly at Jonas’s hunched shoulders, “—fragile, in spirit. And if you— if you have entangled him in… favours… then I must demand rectification!”

Branwen raises a brow, arms folding across her chest.

“Favours,” She repeats flatly.

“Yes!” Eliam declares, seizing on the word as though it were law, “I cannot stand idle while my brother’s reputation— his purity— is soiled under your roof. It is— it is a brother’s duty!”

Jonas makes a strangled sound somewhere between a protest and a groan, clutching the rag tighter. His entire body begs the ground to open up and swallow him. Branwen tilts her head, eyes narrowing in Jonas’s direction, to which he glances away sharply, face burning.

Eliam paces a half-step, his hand fluttering like a man composing a speech to an unseen audience, “Do you not see, Madam Marshal? By claiming his virtue for yourself, you have chained him here. My poor brother— he cannot now find a respectable match, cannot wed, cannot leave this… wretched stone heap for a gentler hearth. You have robbed him of his chance at freedom— his chance at honourable life!”

Jonas chokes, “E-E-Eliam—!”

“Yes, perhaps you thought it kindness, to—” Eliam swallows, colour rising in his cheeks, “To indulge a servant lad’s loneliness. But what is kindness to a boy too meek to refuse? What is charity to one who cannot defend his own refusal? Madam— surely you can see— it is no better than conquest.”

Branwen goes very still. The air in the kennel seems to harden.

“You want to watch your tongue,” She says, low and sharp, her accent thickening like a blade pulled free of its sheath.

Eliam blinks, thrown off by the steel in her voice but scrambling to recover, “I— I mean no disrespect to your station, Marshal. I merely state what must be evident to all—”

“Evident?” Branwen’s voice cracks like a whip. She takes a single step forward, and Eliam instinctively shifts back, “You think you can walk in here, waggle your finger at me, and decide what I’ve done? What Jonas has done? You don’t actually know a thing about him, nor me.”

Jonas, heart hammering, feels the heat of her fury radiating through the building. He shakes his head desperately at Eliam, words tumbling out broken and useless, “N-n-no, she d-d-didn’t— it’s n-not— Eliam, p-please—”

Branwen’s jaw tightens, her eyes locked on Eliam with a glare that could split timber. Jonas doesn’t know how his brother doesn’t outright wilt where he stands when she says, “You want to say that again? What exactly are you accusing me of?”

Jonas’s chest heaves. The words are boiling in him, caught on his tongue like fish in a net, and before he can stop himself, they burst out.

“S-s-she’s my p-pro—protector!”

Jonas’s voice shakes, but he pushes on, stammering past the block as though his life depends on it, “She’s… sh-she’s a s-s-spiritual envoy. From the f-forest. S-s-sent to w-watch over me.”

Eliam stares, mouth half open. His fake noble cadence drops away like a cloak slipping from his shoulders, “A… what?”

Jonas nods too quickly, desperate for him to understand, “The f-f-forest s-spirits… th-they knew I c-c-couldn’t… couldn’t d-do it alone. S-s-so they sent M-Miss Bra—Branwen. To— to guard me. P-p-protect me.”

For the first time, Eliam doesn’t look angry or puffed up, only baffled, “Jonas…” He rubs at the back of his neck, his whole rehearsed act unravelling, leaving just the uncertain brother underneath, “You can’t really— you don’t honestly believe—?”

Jonas clamps his lips shut, heat crawling up his neck. He feels foolish now, exposed, but the words are out and cannot be taken back.

Branwen hasn’t moved. She stands there, arms now slack at her sides, her face unreadable save for the flicker in her eyes.

Eliam gives a small, incredulous laugh, as if trying to brush away the tension, “Forest spirits. You always did have… strange fancies. You sound like our grandparents. I thought you’d grown out of them,” He shakes his head, still unsettled.

The silence hangs heavy until the sound of boots crunching gravel cuts through it. A stablehand rounds the corner first, wide-eyed and wary, followed by one of the estate guards with a hand already resting on the handle of her firearm.

“What’s all this noise?” The guard barks, sharp gaze sweeping over the trio. Her eyes settle on Eliam, his ridiculous clothes somehow too fine for his posture, his stance too nervous for his words, “You. You’re not on the list.”

Eliam straightens instantly, chest puffing up and voice rising back into its cultivated cadence, “Ah! You must be mistaken, madam. I am but a humble visitor, come to check upon my dear little brother,” His hands spread in an open, noble gesture, as though the force of his performance could sway them, “Surely it is no crime to seek kin?”

The guard is unmoved, “Uninvited men don’t stroll onto this property. You’ll come with me.”

The stablehand shifts uncertainly, glancing toward Jonas as if expecting him to explain, but Jonas can’t form words.

Eliam falters, a flicker of unease slipping through before he gathers himself again, dipping into a shallow bow, “If you insist. I would never dream of disturbing the order of so esteemed a household,” He allows the guard to take his arm, though his feet drag just a little.

As she begins to escort him away, Eliam twists his neck, calling back over his shoulder with a desperate brightness that doesn’t quite hide his panic, “Jonas! Take heart, brother. I will write to you, do you hear? I will find a way. You shan’t linger here forever— I’ll see to it! Please… Take care of yourself!” His voice rises, echoing against the stone, parting words half promise, half theatre.

The guard gives him a firm shove to keep him moving, “Enough of that. Walk.”

Eliam stumbles but quickly resumes his dignified bearing, chin high, as though he’s still in command of the situation despite being marched toward the gate. His words trail behind him like scraps of paper caught in the wind, frantic assurances that sound more hollow the further he gets. Jonas doesn’t move. He watches until his brother is gone from sight, heart pounding, unsure whether to feel relief or loss. His hands still tremble from the encounter, and his face remains

warm.

What an exhausting day.

Beside him, Branwen finally exhales, long and low, but says nothing. The stablehand fidgets, clearly curious, but with one look at Branwen's face decides wisely to busy herself with the dogs outside instead.

The stall settles again into its usual rhythm. There are horses inside now, shifting and snorting loudly while a hound barks distantly. But Jonas feels anything but settled. The echo of Eliam's voice clings to him, as persistent as the smell of spilled tonic, a reminder that the world outside has found its way in and will not let him rest easy.

Her voice cuts the silence.

"Why did your brother say that? About your… honour?"

The words lance through him. Renewed heat rushes into his cheeks and crawls up his neck, a brand of shame that makes his skin prickle. He shakes his head once, quick, as if denial could erase it, but she waits. She always waits.

"I-It w-was…" His tongue stumbles, trips, refuses to shape properly. He grips the hem of his sleeve, knuckles whitening and his palm no doubt bloodying it, "M-Merrill… a-and F-Fenn… Th-they… they s-said… th-things. B-bad… ab-bout… m-me and… and y-you."

The flush deepens, his jaw trembling. He wishes he could swallow the words, lock them behind his teeth, but they force their way out in fits

and starts.

"They…" He squeezes his eyes shut. The word tastes bitter. "…they… c-called m-me… a w-w…" He can't finish, not with her gaze on him. His voice breaks, small and raw. "…a… uh… w-wh… s-something… w-with y-you… for… f-favours."

His cheeks are burning now, hotter than fire, and he curls his shoulders in as if the posture could make him smaller, less visible. He doesn't dare look up. The syllables hang there, jagged, impossible to take back, and he feels the ground tilt under him, waiting for the weight of her response.

"I… I'd heard some whispers," She finally says, and it strikes him like a stone tossed into still water. Her gaze doesn't waver, "But not… not much. Seems like you've been getting the… worst of it."

The air between them feels heavy, thick with all the things neither of them names aloud. Embarrassment prickles at his skin, but under it, something warmer stirs, faint and trembling. She knows. She sees.

His mind pulls, unbidden, to the moments she has already stood for him. When Merrill had cornered him, words sharp as a knife, and Branwen had appeared with a sneer that pinned him. Then to the hunting party when Branwen had cut across the space, voice flat as an axe, and Lord Thedden's amusement had faltered under her glare. Each time, relief had spilled through him like sunlight breaking through storm-clouds. He had thought— no, he knew— that she was more than flesh and blood. A guardian. A spirit envoy. Someone the forest had sent, whose presence alone could push back the dark edges of the world.

But now she speaks, and her words scrape against that fragile belief.

“I can’t fight all your battles,” The force of it makes him flinch. Her tone is low, but it carries a weight that pins him in place, “You… you need to learn how to take care of yourself. I can’t be there for every word they throw at you, every glance meant to cut.”

She shifts closer, just a step, and though she doesn’t touch him, the air warms, filled with the heat of her presence. His breath hitches, caught between comfort and dread.

“You think I’m… something more than I am,” Branwen says, softer now, almost grudgingly, like the words are dragged out against her will. Her eyes flick away, then back, “But I’m not magic, Jonas. I’m not… a shield that bends the world around you.” She pauses, her voice narrowing to a quiet insistence, “You need to find the part of you that can stand straight, even when it hurts.”

Her words sink into him, heavy as stones, and yet he clings to them all the same, because beneath the sternness he hears it— something gentler, hidden. Not dismissal. Not disdain. But a belief that he could, perhaps, be more than he thinks.

Branwen shifts her weight, as though she suddenly regrets saying so much. The silence between them stretches, awkward and thick, until she clears her throat and mutters, “Your brother… he must really care about you, if he’s going to come charging at me like that.”

Jonas blinks, startled by the turn, “Guess it says something, doesn’t it? Even if he’s… well, a little all over the place,” The corner of her mouth twitches, a half-smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes.

At that, he thinks he can find his voice again.

“I… I d-don’t… k-know…” Jonas’s throat works and he ducks his head, the sound snagging as if caught on something sharp, “I c-c-can’t even f-figure out h-half the… th-things I f-feel sometimes.”

Jonas stares at the ground, heat crawling up his neck, afraid to see her expression beyond the shy glances he keeps throwing at her, “It… it’s… c-c-confusing,” he finally breathes, the word cracked and uneven.

Jonas swallows. He’s aware, more than ever, of the precariousness of his own connections: the brother who wants to shape his life according to a world Jonas barely understands, and Branwen, whose presence has become a quiet certainty in his chaotic days. The weight of both thoughts presses on him, strange and heavy.

“I get that. I’ve got two sisters, Hesta and Meinwen.”

Jonas blinks. The names are new and unfamiliar, like distant bells he hasn’t heard before. He tilts his head up slightly, chancing a more steady look at her but Branwen doesn’t offer much more.

“I’m the youngest,” She adds, almost clipped, as if she doesn’t care to linger there, “Haven’t seen them in years.”

Her tone leaves little room for questions, so Jonas doesn’t dare ask. He doesn’t know if she wants him to. Still, the mention lodges itself in his chest, stirring something like wonder, that she has people too, out there somewhere. Though she speaks of them as though they belong to another world entirely.

“I-it’s… j-just me and… a-and Eliam. A-and I’m… y-y-younger.”

Branwen's mouth quirks, though it's not quite a smile, "So we're both the babies, then."

The way she says it makes his chest tighten in a way he doesn't know how to name. Something shared, fragile, almost gentle, though it's gone as quickly as it comes, leaving the air between them weighted but strangely close.

"You're bleeding."

The softness in Branwen's tone vanishes like mist in sunlight. She reaches for his hand before he can even tuck it away, turning it over with a brusque kind of care. A thin line of red has welled along his palm.

Jonas stammers, trying to pull back, "I–it's n-nothing, j-just…"

"Nothing, my arse," She says, letting him go and striding toward the supply chest tucked against the stable wall. She yanks out a strip of linen and a small jar of salve, her movements brisk, all business now. When she comes back, she doesn't give him a chance to argue, "Hold still."

Her fingers are sure and steady as she presses the salve to the cut. It stings, and Jonas hisses, shoulders flinching, but she doesn't let go. She wraps the linen snug around his palm, knotting it tight enough to hold, her touch rough but never careless.

The shared moment from before— the brief mention of siblings, the odd sense of closeness— seems gone, swept aside by her blunt efficiency. And yet, as Jonas watches her bent over his hand, hair falling in a dark strand across her brow, he feels a quiet ease steal over him.

He's tired, worn down by the day and the muddle of feelings about Eliam, but in this small act, he lets himself exhale. The tension in his chest loosens, if only a fraction. When she ties the last knot and lets his hand go, he doesn't miss the way her warmth lingers on his skin, a fleeting imprint that stays even as she straightens up and dusts her palms.

Neither of them speak of what happened earlier in the day. The topic is done and Jonas quietly returns to the house, hiding in hallways and avoiding everyone else as he gently rubs his bandaged palm. Her ring in his head, unbidden.

"I can't fight all your battles."

The letter arrives folded neat, though the script inside is jagged and eager, as if Eliam had been leaning too hard into the quill. Jonas sits on the edge of his cot, knees drawn to his chest.

The words are exactly what he expects: Full of that big, brotherly certainty, the same tone Eliam had used since Jonas was small enough to trail behind him in the fields.

Jonas,

I hope this finds you well. I've been thinking on you since our meeting, and I can't get out of my head how much you've had to put up with. I swear to you, I'll find something to cure that tongue of yours yet. You'll speak smooth as river stone before the year's out, I'll wager. Just don't lose heart. You were never meant to be stuck in the muck of some estate, treated worse than the dogs you tend. We'll have you married yet, a good home, a

good wife, and you'll be rid of that place. Don't you worry— I'll see to it.

Jonas's throat tightens as his eyes skim further. Eliam promises again to keep looking, to write when he can, to come back soon. Near the end, a slip of coin has been pressed into the fold, enough to buy a tincture or two. A smaller bottle. Eliam even notes it outright— *Put this to good use, mind, the apothecary might have something stronger this time. Spend it on yourself, not on anyone else.*

Jonas sets the money down on the blanket beside him, staring at the dull gleam of it. He knows what Eliam hopes it will buy. He also knows it won't— not his voice smoothed, not his shame lessened. He thinks of the last bottle, shattered at his feet, sticky glass glittering in the stone path.

His chest aches with a mix of warmth and weariness. Eliam's love is… clumsy, heavy-handed and bright, a shield swung in the wrong direction. And Jonas, folding the letter shut again, tucks both it and the coin beneath his pillow.

He'll write back this time. But the coins will likely stay where they are, or find their way toward flour and oil for baking.

Another attempt. Jonas will keep trying, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Do you think he'll get that cake made? Place your bets!

Chapter 8: Interlude: Tripwire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The town of Merrow’s Hill didn’t have a hill, nor much of a view. But it had order.

It was a place built not for poetry but for predictability, its rows of brick and limestone houses aligned like lines in a ledger. The main road, old Dominion stone, ran through the centre like a vein, bordered by modest shopfronts with painted shutters and hanging signs that creaked in the wind. Carriages with the Dominion crest occasionally passed through on their way to larger cities, their wheels throwing up dust in the dry season and ruts in the wet.

To live in Merrow’s Hill was to know your place. And that place was not a bad one, just... *defined.* Blacksmiths' daughters carried iron tang on their sleeves and spoke bold as anyone. The baker's sons were expected to rise before dawn, just like their father. No one starved, but no one reached too far either. People didn’t dream of fortune. Not really. They dreamed of *stability*, of a son married to a textile mistress, or a daughter taken on as a clerk in a Lady’s counting house.

Lady Iressa, the town’s matron and noble overseer, was more name than presence. She visited once a year during census season, sometimes twice if the riverbanks swelled. Her crest— twin lilies over crossed sickles— was carved above the town hall doors and stitched into the trim of the mayor’s coat. Lady Iressa did not govern directly; her stewards did, through edicts and inspections and official parchment posted at the corners of the market square. But still, people said her name with a kind of careful reverence, like you might a distant aunt who paid your school fees but never visited for supper.

The town had layers. Along the riverbanks, the homes were low and humble. Timber-framed and moss-flecked, with sloped roofs and vegetable patches squashed into every spare corner. Laundry lines stretched like nets between houses, and children played in the alleys with handmade marbles and tar-baked tops. These were the worker families, the labourers, the weavers, the potboys, and dock scrubs. Their windows were small, but their kitchens were warm, thick with the smell of lard and onion.

Farther up, though it was barely a slope, stood the administrative quarter: tall brick and limestone houses with iron fences and tidy stoops. Here lived the lettered wives, the steward's assistants, and the registry clerks. They wore gloves even in summer and had sons who were told early that good posture was a virtue. Jonas's mother always told him to keep his shoes polished in case one of them saw him, *"Better to look like you belong,"* She'd say, straightening his collar, *"Even if you don't."*

And at the very top, just at the edge of the orchards, sat Lady Iressa's old manor house, now used mostly for official inspections and seasonal visits. Jonas had only seen the interior once, when his school class was taken to deliver a poem to one of the stewards. He remembered being struck by the smoothness of the floors, the strange scent of beeswax and ink, and the way no one seemed to raise their voice. That wasn't where people *lived,* he'd thought. That was where they *watched.*

The seasons moved gently through Merrow's Hill. Spring came with fog, and summer with mild heat. But nothing came hard or sudden, not until the year Jonas's stutter really started to bloom, and the whole town seemed to pause around him like he'd stepped out of rhythm. It was a town that prized the tidy, the well-spoken, and the dependable. He could write beautifully, yes. But when he tried to speak— especially to strangers— his words snagged. His voice tripped.

And in Merrow's Hill, people didn't know what to do with *tripwire.*

The first time it happens, Jonas is standing in front of the town's post office.

He is squinting up at the bronze plaque that hangs above the door. *Under Lady Iressa's Mercy,* it says. His father is beside him, reminding him to read it out loud, as Jonas is learning to speak aloud. To practise the way the letters sound together.

"Un-der L-Lady Iressa's Mer—" The last word sticks, his mouth shaping the syllable but the air refusing to follow. His chest pulls tight, the way it does when he runs too hard, but this time there is no running, no reason. Just a wall where the word should be. He stumbles over it, tries again. Finally it comes, jagged and slow, "M-M… Me–Mercy."

His father chuckles and ruffles his hair, as though it is nothing, a hiccup of the tongue and nothing more. And Jonas, cheeks warm, convinces himself it is nothing too.

But it happens again.

At school, when the boys are gathered at their slates, chalk dust on their fingers, the tutor points to the line he has written out: *"Sons must learn obedience. Daughters must learn order."* The girls, on the far side of the hall behind the wooden partition, copy their own maxim in silence. Jonas knows his letters, faster even than Eliam did at his age. But when the tutor calls on him to read it out, his voice tangles on the very first word.

"S-s-s…" The chalk squeaks in someone's hand. A chair leg scrapes. Jonas's throat burns. He tries again, slower, willing the word to be good this time. "S-s-s…" His tongue feels thick and useless. By the

time he manages to push out the sound, the rest of the sentence is gone from his head.

The tutor sighs. The other boys shift in their seats. No one says anything cruel. Not yet. But the air changes. Jonas can feel it, even as young as he is.

The town isn't cruel. But it has rules. Sons are to be well-behaved and useful, neat with their handwriting and gentle in their manners. For a time, Jonas is all of those things. He helps his father snap beans in the garden. He copies his letters in tidy rows, cleaner than Eliam ever managed. His mother tells him he is clever, that his words on paper are sharp and sweet.

But clever doesn't count for much when the words don't come out right in the open air. And by the year he turns six, everyone in Merrow's Hill knows— Jonas's voice stumbles.

At first, the tutors only pause. Their quills still, their brows knit, and their mouths twitch as though deciding whether to wait for Jonas or to move on. They don't scold him, not exactly. They correct him gently, remind him to breathe and tell him to slow down. But the reminders never stop. Each lesson seems to draw them out again.

"Take your time, Jonas."

"Now, try again. Carefully."

"Speak clearly, lad."

It is never said unkindly, but Jonas hears it more than anyone else. He begins to dread the moment when the tutor's eyes pass over the rows of boys and land on him.

The other boys notice. They're not slow; they know what patterns mean.

At first, it's snickers. A hiss of laughter when his jaw works too long over a word, when his tongue seems to catch behind his teeth. Then it's mimicry. It's harmless at first, a few syllables dragged out in mockery of the way he stumbles. But children can be sharper than knives. By the time Jonas is seven, some of them don't even wait for him to open his mouth. They whisper and trip over their own voices on purpose, drawing out syllables until the class erupts.

Jonas doesn't understand. He knows he is not sick, knows he can run and climb just like Eliam, can write faster than most of them. But when he speaks and they laugh, something inside him knots, heavy and hot. He wants to disappear into the slateboard, into the pages of his copybook where his handwriting runs smooth and obedient.

The teachers never punish the boys too harshly. Sometimes a sharp word, a slap of the cane against a desk to quiet them, but rarely more. They, too, don't know what to do with Jonas's snags and stalls during elocution lessons. The town is orderly, predictable. Boys are supposed to be steady. Girls are supposed to be precise. And Jonas, despite his tidy rows of letters, his careful posture, is neither when he opens his mouth.

In the schoolyard, it's worse. There, no tutors are watching and children don't need cruelty to wound. They only need laughter. And Jonas learns, far earlier than most, that a laugh can hollow you out. The boys spill out after lessons, their voices bouncing against the brick walls like thrown marbles. Jonas stays close to the slate wall, clutching his copybook to his chest, waiting for Eliam to come find him.

He doesn't see them until they're already circling. Three boys, older by a year but not much taller.

"Say somethin', Jonas," One of them grins, crooked-toothed, "Say *anything.*"

Jonas blinks. He hadn't been speaking at all. He shakes his head, but they're already starting.

"C-c-c-cluck," One of them stutters out, jerking his head forward like a chicken, "Cluck-Jonas!"

The others burst out laughing. Jonas feels the knot in his chest start to form, heavy and confusing, "I—I—" He tries, but it comes out as a choke.

"Kettle-Tongue!" Another crows, "Sounds like a pot what won't boil." He starts whistling nonsense, high-pitched and shrill, while the third boy bangs his hand against his stomach like a drum.

"Knotjaw," The crooked-tooth one declares, grinning like he's invented something clever, "That's what he is. Knotjaw."

The word sticks. The others take it up, chanting as they circle him, "Knotjaw, Knotjaw, Knotjaw!"

Jonas grips his copybook tighter. He doesn't understand. He wants to speak, to say stop, but the words won't come. Every sound feels tangled and trapped. His cheeks burn hot.

Then, Eliam's voice cuts through, "Oi!"

Eliam shoves through the circle. He's older, broader in the shoulders and taller, so he steps through the circle of boys easily, "Leave him."

The other boys scatter, laughter spilling behind them as they go, "Knotjaw!" one of them hollers over his shoulder. Jonas doesn't move. His chest still feels tight, his throat raw though he hasn't spoken more than a word.

"You alright?" Eliam asks, frowning at him.

Jonas nods, though he isn't sure. He doesn't know what *alright* is supposed to feel like. He only knows the laughter still rings in his ears, sharp and bright, and he doesn't understand why his mouth won't work the way it should.

Eliam nudges him in the shoulder, "Don't listen. They're just stupid."

Jonas wants to believe him. He tries. But as they walk home, the word follows him, clinging to the back of his mind like burrs caught in cloth. It's a word that would eventually find him in a faraway estate.

Knotjaw.

The kitchen table is scarred with knife marks and ink blots, the wood

catching at his sleeve when he leans too far. Jonas sits small in the chair, feet not yet touching the floor, a primer propped open before him.

“Slower,” His mother says. Her voice carries over the crack and spit of the hearth. She smells of wool grease and stone dust, the day’s labour still clinging to her clothes. One hand smooths the page, the other taps firm against the wood beside his knuckles, “Follow the curve. Let your tongue match the shape.”

Jonas tries. His lips press, stumble, catch. The word is short— *bread*— but it takes him three starts before it comes out whole.

“There,” His mother says. Not praise, not really. Just a nod, like marking a figure on a ledger.

His father sits across the table, rubbing resin from his fingertips, “Steady now. You’ll manage better if you don’t fight it.”

But Jonas doesn’t know how *not* to fight it. The words feel like stones in his throat.

Eliam leans against the doorframe, watching. He smothers a laugh when Jonas trips on a longer word, *obedient,* his tongue catching on the middle. Their mother shoots Eliam a sharp look, but the older boy only shrugs, still grinning. Later, he’ll slip torn pages from old storybooks under Jonas’s pillow, guiding him to try again when no one is listening.

The lesson continues. Jonas’s mother corrects his mouth, makes him repeat. His father reminds him to breathe. The fire pops, the house smells faintly of onions and boiled roots.

The effort is there, heavy in the room, a kind of love that insists he must do better because the world will not wait for him to catch up. Jonas swallows, staring at the page until the letters blur. He doesn't know how to tell them the words don't sit in his mouth the way they're supposed to. He only knows he has to keep trying.

Days later, supper is plain: root mash, fried onion, and a heel of bread each. The lamp burns low, throwing yellow light across the table, and the air hums with the clink of cutlery.

No lessons tonight. His mother's shoulders sag from the day's work, her palms rough and red as she eats quickly, like someone who doesn't trust time to be kind. His father chews slower, jotting down the skeleton of a thought on the scrap ledger beside his plate whenever it comes to him. He later gives his wife a shoulder massage.

Jonas doesn't speak. He doesn't need to. The silence is a relief, but it carries its own weight. His stumbles still echo in the back of his mind, the way the word *obedient* caught and split earlier that week, Eliam's muffled laugh still sharp in his ear, despite how he knows his brother would never truly mean it maliciously. Across the table, his mother glances at him. Just a glance. But her eyes hold the same tired insistence. The message is voiceless but rings loud in his ears, he has to keep at it and keep smoothing the edges.

Eliam fills the gap easily, bragging about how he ran errands faster than the other boys, how Matron Varle praised his handwriting. His words tumble out clean and whole, and their mother smiles at him without restraint.

Jonas takes another mouthful of mash, his spoon scraping the bowl. He thinks of the primer left on the table's edge, half-hidden under his father's notes. The book isn't open, but it might as well be. The lesson hangs in the air even now, threaded through the lamp-smoke and the

sag of his mother's shoulders: speak better, be better, so you can make yourself worth something.

He swallows, nodding at nothing. Nobody has said a word to him all meal, but he feels as though he's already failed.

But he wants to speak, wants to have something to add.

"I… I—" The word catches, claws at his tongue. His face heats. He tries again, "I h-h-he…"

Three false starts and the room stills.

His father sets down his spoon, tilts his head like he's listening for a bird's song gone off-key. His mother's eyes fix hard on him, her shoulders straightening from their sag. Eliam glances sideways, the shine of his earlier grin gone, lips pressed thin as if he wants to speak for him but knows he shouldn't. A few days, and it's already gotten to a point where Eliam doesn't have a good natured chuckle at his stammer anymore.

"Take your time," His mother says softly, but there's an edge to it, like a string pulled too tight.

Jonas swallows, his throat dry. The word he'd been reaching for—*helped,* about helping his father tidy the back garden— slips away. He can't catch it. Can't get any of them out.

Finally he lowers his gaze and says nothing.

The silence lingers, heavy as the stew pot. Then Eliam fills it again, leaping in with another story about school. His mother exhales, her shoulders dipping back into tiredness, and the moment folds itself away like a piece of paper slid into a drawer. Jonas eats quickly after that, every scrape of his spoon too loud in his ears. He feels the shape of the word still stuck on his tongue, heavy as a stone.

And under it all, he feels what none of them say out loud: words matter. They're part of what makes a boy useful, presentable and most importantly, worthy of being chosen. And what good is he, if his won't come out right?

The kitchen at his grandparents' house always smells of yeast and woodsmoke, the sort of smell that sinks into your clothes and lingers long after you've gone. The rafters hang low, dark with years of smoke, and there's always a candle guttering in the window, meant to keep the wandering ones at bay. A striped cat curls on the hearthstone, tail flicking, eyes half-closed, though she always lifts her head when Jonas enters, as if she knows he needs watching. Sometimes she hops into his lap without warning, kneading her paws into his thin legs until he giggles and forgets to be ashamed of the way words stick in his throat.

His grandmother is a stout woman, hair silver as frost and always pinned tight under her kerchief. Her palms are rough from farmwork, but steady, and when she presses a mug of warm milk into his hands she clucks at him the same way she does the hens.

"No shame in words tangling," she tells him, brushing the hair back from his forehead with a tenderness his mother never seems to have time for, "It's not your fault, boy. Could be a spirit caught hold, could be the fair ones playing tricks. Best keep a cat near you. They don't like cats."

Jonas sips the milk, eyes wide, listening. The cat, Elsie, presses against his shin, purring, as if to underline her words.

His grandfather sits by the hearth, knife working slowly and carefully at peeling potatoes. His hands are square, knotted with years of labour alongside his wife, and his voice is low and grave when he finally speaks. “Or maybe,” He says, “Maybe it’s the shadows. They get in if you’re not careful crossing doorways. Curl up in your throat, they do, and knot the words before you can get ’em out.”

Jonas swallows hard, the milk sweet on his tongue. The thought should frighten him, but instead it brings a strange comfort. If it’s spirits or shadows, then it’s not him— Not some flaw baked into his bones. Just something that slipped in, something that can be outwitted.

His grandmother sees the flicker of hope in his eyes and smiles, soft as worn wool, “We’ll keep the candles lit and lay the salt line thick. Don’t you fret. You’ll speak clear when the time’s right.”

That night by the hearth, as Elsie wound herself into the crook of his lap and purring like a kettle, his grandmother rubbed balm into his small hands and told him stories of the folk: The half-seen ones who lived behind mirrors and hearthstones, between chimney bricks and cupboard walls, hiding in shadows. Tricksy, clever, and always watching.

“They don’t mean harm, not always. But sometimes they see a thing they like— a bit of luck, a pretty voice, a boy’s bright laughter— and they take it. Your voice may’ve been borrowed, is all. Caught in a crossing. Spirits pass the threshold same as we do. Sometimes quicker. Sometimes quiet.”

His grandfather across the fire grunts once in approval, “You mind

your crossings, lad."

From then on, Jonas begins to take the *Shadow Crossings* seriously.

He learns to mark thresholds the old way. A bit of salt tucked into the heel of one boot, and a smudge of hearth soot pressed gently to the brow. He can't always manage it, especially later at the estate, but he always hesitates at a doorway, just long enough to whisper the words they gave him:

"Salt to heel, smoke to brow, let no unseen follow now. Let not shadow walk with me."

He stutters them terribly at first, especially the second line where his tongue always catches. Eventually he only says them in his head—quietly, firmly— every time he crosses a beam, a threshold, or an arch. It becomes a habit like breathing. A comfort like wool. And more than that, it gives him something his parents cannot: A story in which his stutter isn't his shame, but a trick, a theft, something borrowed by unseen hands.

Maybe it hadn't come from inside him. Maybe something noticed him, long ago, and followed him home. Maybe it curls in his blankets at night and tickles his tongue until words fumble.

At six years old, Jonas believes his grandparents. Believes in shadows, fair folk, the thin places between.

The thought should have frightened him.

But it doesn't.

It makes him feel… seen. And strangely safe.

Maybe it's not my fault.

The table is set the same as always: His father bustling between pot and ladle, apron dusted with flour, while his mother keeps her hands folded against the table, gaze sharp as a tack. Jonas perches on the rough-planked bench, legs dangling and the grain catching his stockings. Eliam sprawls on another bench, older and restless, always drumming his fingers or kicking the bench-leg when he thinks no one will notice.

"Tell us, Jonas," His mother says, the words gentle but carrying weight, "What did you learn today?"

Jonas stiffens. He knows this part. Knows the pause that follows, the expectant hush, even the faint tightening in his father's shoulders as he stirs at the hearth. The clink of the ladle against the pot echoes too loud in the silence.

"I–I… I… l-l…" His tongue snags, stumbles. The words bunch in his throat like knotted string, "L-l… l-letters."

His mother leans forward, tapping two fingers on the table as though beating time for him, "Slower. Let the word settle. Letters. Say it after me. Let-ters."

"L…l–l–letters."

“That’s it. Good. Again.”

Across from him, Eliam looks away. His father ladles stew into bowls with more force than necessary, the splash of broth masking the sound of Jonas’s halting attempts. The food comes, thick and steaming, but the taste is dulled for Jonas, swallowed between each effort at another word, another answer. His mother never scolds, never raises her voice, but her gaze presses down like a millstone. She means to help. She always means to help.

Between corrections, their talk drifts into other channels, “He’ll need a proper match,” His mother says, her voice low but not low enough, “Someone from the administrative quarter, perhaps. A clerk’s daughter. They’re steady households. Sensible.”

His father hums in agreement, setting bread on the table, “Would give him a sure roof.”

Jonas stares into his bowl, watching the carrots soften in the broth. The word *comfort* tastes strange in his mouth. He can’t imagine speaking it aloud.

“Eliam will do well enough,” His mother continues, nodding toward the older boy, who immediately stiffens in attention, “But Jonas… Jonas needs a gentler hand. A patient wife.”

Jonas presses his knees together beneath the table, cheeks hot, the stew scent suddenly too thick in his nose. He knows it isn’t meant to wound. They want him safe, settled and cared for. But the words press as heavy as the others, lodging in his chest where no amount of repeating can shake them loose.

And when the next question comes— *“What did the teacher write on the board today?”*— he almost wishes he didn’t know the answer at all.

Later that evening, Jonas and Eliam retire to their room. It’s small but they have two narrow beds against opposite walls, and the window lets in a little moonlight, enough to make the uneven floorboards gleam faintly. Jonas lies curled on his side, staring at the wall, stomach heavy with stew and the hollow ache of supper. He wants sleep to come quick, to wash the night away. But across the room, Eliam rustles. A familiar sound. The tearing of paper.

“Here,” A page flutters onto Jonas’s blanket as Eliam approaches his bed, “Try this one.”

Jonas turns, blinking at the torn sheet. The ink is faded at the edges, the corners bent soft with use. He doesn’t need to ask where it came from. Eliam’s been hoarding storybooks for months now, ripping them to pieces in the market square whenever he can. A trick to smuggle them home, page by page. Jonas swallows. His mouth is already dry.

“You’ve got to practise,” Eliam says, sharper now, though his face is soft in the pale light, “Mother says… well, you heard her. We can’t—” He stops, runs a hand through his hair, “Just read it. Slow.”

Jonas stares down at the page, letters crawling like ants across the paper. The first word sticks in his throat before he’s even spoken it.

“G–g–g–”

“Good. Go on.”

“G–g–g–irl,” His lips tighten. He feels the weight of Eliam’s gaze, hot on his face even in the dark. He presses harder, “W–went… t-t-t…to the—”

“Slower. Don’t rush it.”

Jonas exhales, trembling. His tongue aches with the effort, his jaw sore as though the words are stones he’s being forced to chew.

“W-w-w…woods.”

“That’s it,” Eliam’s grin is quick, proud, though gone almost at once, “See? You can do it.”

Jonas nods, though his chest feels tight. He knows it’s meant to help. Knows his brother wants the best for him, the same as mother and father. But the page trembles in his fingers, and he can’t tell if it’s from the effort or something else entirely. Jonas’s fingers worry the edge of the story-page, softening it further, but he can’t bring himself to try another word. He swallows, then says, very small, “E–Eliam?”

In the dark, Eliam raises a brow at him.

“D–do you th-think…” Jonas hesitates, “D–do you th-think I’ll find… a g–g–g… good m–match?”

For a moment, Eliam doesn’t answer. Jonas braces for a sigh, or worse, silence. But then his brother returns to his own bed and shifts onto his elbow, eyes catching the thin moonlight.

“’Course you will,” The words come quick and sure, “Don’t be daft. Mother wouldn’t settle for anything less.”

Jonas nods, though the knot in his chest doesn’t loosen, “B-But… wh–what if—”

Eliam cuts him off, voice low but sparking with an excitement Jonas doesn’t often hear, “You’re thinking too small,” His hand gestures vaguely, like he’s painting something in the air, “She wants us in the administrative quarter, sure. Some neat little clerk’s daughter, ink-stained fingers, all proper. But what if—” His eyes brighten, his grin sharp. “What if it’s better? What if one of us catches the eye of someone noble?”

Jonas blinks, “N–n–noble?”

“Why not?” Eliam sits up straighter now, voice dropping into a mock-smoothness that makes him sound older than his twelve years, “It happens. A lady takes a liking, and— well, a good son knows how to bow right, how to talk right, how to carry himself. You marry well, Jonas, and you don’t just get a roof and a belly full. You get everything.”

He laughs, a little too loud for the quiet night, and flops back down onto his bed. “Just wait. We’ll see. I’m not going to be stuck patching boots or bending under some petty mistress. I’m going to—” He trails off, shaking his head, but the smile stays, “Doesn’t matter. You’ll see.”

Jonas curls tighter around the torn page. He wants to believe it, wants to take comfort in his brother’s certainty. But all he can hear is the way his own tongue drags and falters, how the words never come smooth.

Still, Eliam's voice lingers in the dark, full of restless hunger and sharp with promise. Jonas stays awake for a long time.

He likes it when Elsie rubs herself on his legs when he visits his grandparents.

His grandfather sits stiff-backed in the chair nearest the door, his big hands always busy with twine or whittling, while his grandmother settles herself by the fire, her skirts brushing the hearth.

"Red keeps the crooked ones away," She tells him, tugging a strip of worn fabric from her pocket. Always red— faded shawl-ends, torn hems, scraps from his mother's clothes that she refuses to throw out. She places it into Jonas's palm with fingers quick and certain, "Wards against fair folk and foul thoughts alike. Especially for a boy with a tender tongue."

His grandfather is also a man of ritual. At the first crack of thunder, he rises from his chair and shuffles to the doorframe, muttering under his breath. Two spits to the ground and then he ties more red twine tight over the lintel, "Storms stir them up. Best keep a line they can't cross."

Jonas watches from the threshold, wide-eyed, the spit hissing faintly where it strikes the hearthstone. He doesn't understand how twine or cloth can stop unseen things, but the sight of it, the steady way his grandfather's hands move, calms him more than any primer at the supper table ever has.

And when the wind howls, when shadows lean too far into corners, it is his grandmother who once again smooths a red scrap over his hand and whispers, "Your mother wore this once, so your heart won't twist while you sleep."

It doesn't matter that the cloth is basically a ragged handkerchief. Jonas's fingers curls around it, comfort seeping in the way only a child can believe— That red is stronger than fear, stronger than stumbles, stronger than the words that catch in his throat.

He sleeps over at his grandparents that night. Jonas curls beneath the quilt in the little loft bed, Elsie hops up after him. She circles once, then settles against his chest, her purring filling the small room like a charm.

Where dogs are loyal to people and horses to the land, cats owe nothing to anyone… Except themselves. That independence makes them invisible to bargains and glamours, which the fair folk thrive on. A spirit cannot trick a cat into servitude, cannot bribe them with sweet words, cannot even cross a threshold where a cat is watching.

His grandparent's stories say their purring rattles the bones of unseen things, unsettling them and thus driving them back into the dark. A cat curled at the foot of a bed is a ward as strong as salt or iron; no spirit dares steal a dream or a voice while a cat keeps watch. And if the fair folk *do* draw close, the cat will always know. The flick of an ear, the sudden hiss at an empty corner are signs enough to remind a child that they are not alone, that the unseen has been noticed, and therefore held at bay.

Jonas strokes Elsie's fur until his eyelids droop. For once, he doesn't dream of stuck words or his parents' sharp sighs. He doesn't lie awake fretting about what will spill out of his mouth tomorrow. The purr thrums steady through his ribs, into his bones, a reminder that the fair ones can't touch him here.

It's the best rest he's ever known.

By the time he is ten, his parents adopt some of their own superstitions. It doesn't give him the same comfort that his grandparents do.

His mother calls him into the washroom after the midday bell, while Eliam clatter spoons in the kitchen behind him. He steps in barefoot, the cool stone floor prickling his feet.

"Sit," She says, patting the stool. She doesn't smile.

Jonas obeys. Cold water baths have become routine now. It's supposed to help but he doesn't know how. His parents mention something about "the humours."

She holds the basin steady with one hand while the other pours the frigid water. It splashes in heavy, bracing arcs; already steeped with mint leaves and a sharp thread of vinegar. A copper coin winks at the bottom, dulled by age. She's told him before: copper draws out "speech rot," the way salt draws rot from meat. It's what the matrons used, back when words went sour in a boy's mouth.

"Lean forward," She says gently.

Jonas lowers his head. His fingers grip the stool's edge.

She cups a handful of water and pours it over his scalp, letting it trickle past his ears and jaw. Then another. Then another. The chill steals his breath, but he doesn't move.

“W-we—w-we g-give g-g-grace,” He tries to recite from the household table prayer, because he knows she likes it when he does things like that. Maybe she’ll be proud.

But the words tumble like a kettle clattering down steps: sharp, jarring, wrong.

His mother flinches.

“Again,” She says, “Slower. Don’t rush.”

He swallows, nods, tries again, “W-we… w-we g-g-g—”

“Again.”

He stumbles. Falters. *Fails.*

Behind her, his father leans against the doorframe, arms crossed tight, eyes narrowed with the weariness of someone who’s stopped expecting improvement but doesn’t know how to give up out loud.

“We c-c-c-c—” Jonas stops, breath catching. He doesn’t cry.

His mother sighs, “Your cousin Lyle spoke clean at five. Why can’t you just—”

Her voice cuts off. She isn't cruel, not really. Just tired. Just scared. That's what Jonas keeps telling himself because it has to be real.

She kneels in front of him, cups his face in her damp hands. Mint and vinegar cling to her skin. With her thumb, she presses the centre of his brow and whispers an old matron's charm.

"Silver tongue, clean tongue, clear as stream and bright as sun—"

Jonas doesn't answer. He stares past her shoulder, heart beating like a moth in a jar.

When the words are done, she kisses his forehead. But she doesn't say she's proud.

Instead, she stands, wipes her hands on her clothes, and tells him not to talk until supper, "Just for today," She says, as if that makes it kinder. "Let the water do its work."

Jonas nods. He doesn't speak.

He's already learning silence feels safer than failing out loud.

After the bath, Jonas pads into the kitchen, hair still damp, shirt clinging where it's soaked through. Eliam now sits cross-legged on the bench, scraps of cloth spread across his lap. He's tearing seams from old shirts, stitching them together into something half-coat, half-costume, thread pulled too tight in places and loose in others.

“See here,” Eliam says, holding up the crooked patchwork collar. His voice lurches into a lofty tone, vowels stretched and consonants clipped sharp, “‘Good eve, madam. Might I inquire after your holdings in the quarter?’” He lifts his chin, nose tilted as if surveying a court from some high seat.

Their parents laugh. Their father shakes his head but doesn’t stop smiling. Their mother takes an apple and bites into it, saying, “Don’t pull the thread so rough, you’ll tear the cloth.” But her eyes linger on him, amused and— *Approving.*

Jonas slides onto the bench across from them. No one looks at him. His skin smells faintly of vinegar and mint, the chill of the basin still settled deep in his scalp. He folds his hands in his lap, quiet.

Eliam straightens his patched-together coat and bows with a flourish, his gestures exaggerated and dramatic, “‘Why yes, Lady Ashthorn, I would be most delighted to attend your hearth supper.’”

His parents chuckle again.

Jonas presses his knees together under the table. He isn’t jealous— he tells himself that— but sometimes it feels like his brother is the only boy in the house. As if Eliam belongs to them all, admired, entertained, while Jonas sits half-faded, made smaller by silence.

He doesn’t speak. He knows better now. He only tries when his family is making him practise, hoping he’ll magically speak normally.

His father leans against the counter, arms folded, smiling faintly at Eliam’s performance, “Keep that up, and you’ll charm half the quarter before you’re of age. Maybe even catch the eye of that innkeeper. She’s always looking at you when we stop in.”

Their mother chuckles, though her words come firmer, “A good innkeeper’s wife would set you well. Strong business, steady work. You’d eat well and live clean.”

Eliam wrinkles his nose, tugging the collar of his makeshift coat higher, “An innkeeper?” He shakes his head with a small, performative scoff, “I can do better. I’ll speak proper, dress proper, and find someone with real standing. A wife who lives near the tower, maybe.”

Their parents exchange a glance— half amusement, half worry— but they don’t correct him.

Jonas sits quiet at the edge of the table, water dripping still from the ends of his hair. His brother’s voice fills the kitchen, rolling, rehearsing, grasping toward some imagined grandeur. And Jonas folds further inward, as if vanishing would keep the attention off him.

Jonas lowers his eyes to the table, tracing the deep gouges in the wood with his thumb. The rough edges catch against his skin, and he presses harder until it almost hurts. He doesn’t look up when Eliam laughs, doesn’t meet his parents’ gazes. He just nods when his father sets a plate in front of him, the sound of his brother’s lofty words swelling around him like smoke.

Inside, though, he thinks what he always thinks in moments like this: That maybe if he stays quiet enough, still enough, they’ll forget to notice how badly he fails at being the son they want.

A boy’s voice isn’t his own. It’s his mother’s pride, his future wife’s

dignity. Husbands are expected to speak when called upon, and when they do, their words must be smooth, poised, and free of stumble. His tutors and classrooms echo with little reminders: *"A man's tongue reflects a woman's honour. A husband who falters, shames her."*

For Jonas, every snagged syllable feels like proof that he is broken in some essential way. His parents keep trying the usual remedies. Cold water baths, holding his jaw as he is told to repeat phrases slowly, making him practice recitations until his throat aches. None of it helps. He swallows the lessons, internalizes their sighs and pinched expressions, and learns what they don't quite say as plainly: A stuttering boy can't be paraded proudly as a match.

So he compensates. He learns to be silent where he can, to nod, to bow, to smooth over his failures with obedience. If his tongue betrays him, perhaps his hands can redeem him. He cooks, helps his grandparents with chores, takes on extra work without complaint. He becomes deft at the small things like kneading bread until his fingers ache, folding linens into perfect, sharp corners, and sweeping floors until not a speck remains.

Even as a child, he tells himself that if he cannot serve with his voice, he will serve with his labour. If he cannot bring honour by speech, he will bring it by usefulness. His worth, then, will be measured in clean floors, in well-baked loaves, in quiet diligence. He imagines one day standing at the shoulder of some lady, silent as a shadow, her table neat, her clothing mended, her tea always brewed at the right strength.

What he cannot know yet— what no child ever does— is that the world will not forgive his stutter just because his hands are skilled. But in these years, before he is sent away, Jonas clings to the fragile hope that silence and service might be enough. And without realizing it, he begins shaping himself into the kind of servant every great house desires. One that is watchful and discreet. A boy with a broken voice, training himself to vanish into duty.

A servant who would one day have other people's duties and chores thrust upon him, extra responsibilities he takes on without the ability or courage to speak up for himself.

By twelve, Eliam has long since stopped standing at Jonas's side. His older brother is too busy now. He's learning how to bow without creasing his coat, how to speak with his hands folded neat, how to keep his vowels smooth, how to mend clothing and be bright for the matrons who might one day choose him. Jonas doesn't blame him. Not really. It's just the way things go. Boys need to be good husbands and little else.

So when dismissal comes, Jonas lingers at the edge of the yard, where the stone wall dips low and weeds crawl thick between the cracks. He crouches with a strip of bark peeled from a fallen branch, bending it with careful fingers and folding the ends until it resembles the husk of a boat. His thumb smooths the rough edges, mind fixed only on the small task. His breath steadies with each bend and crease. For once, no boys crowd him, no mocking voices turn his name into knots. Just quiet. Just him and the boat.

A shadow falls across him.

"You made that?"

Jonas startles, almost dropping the bark. A girl stands there. Lenne, from the row of houses near the mill. She's taller than him, thin as a willow switch, her hair a dark coil pinned high though strands slip free to brush her cheeks. Her eyes are quick, curious, not sharp like the others. The hem of her patched tunic is wet from dragging through the grass, and there's a chalk smudge on her cheek like she's been scribbling on the schoolhouse wall. She looks like she doesn't much care who sees.

Jonas opens his mouth, but no sound comes. His chest locks tight.

Lenne doesn't frown. Nor does she laugh. She crouches so her knees press into the dirt, tilts her head at the little bark boat in his palm, "Looks like it could float," She says, matter-of-fact, "If you don't mind it turning circles."

At his continued stunned silence, Lenne glances at him. The attention almost makes Jonas flinch.

"You don't talk much, huh? That's all right. My brother says I talk enough for three people."

Jonas flushes hot, his eyes darting to the ground, to the boat, to anywhere but her. He tries to say something, but all that comes is the sharp catch of a consonant, the helpless clatter of his tongue refusing to obey.

"Could you make one for me?"

He blinks. No one's ever asked him for anything before. Not like this, not with such ease, as though it's natural. He nods, barely.

"Good," Lenne stands, brushing grass from her clothes. Her braid sways against her back as she turns, "Meet me at the lake tomorrow. After class. We can race our boats!"

And that's it. She walks off, quick and certain, as if she hasn't just upended his entire world.

Jonas stays crouched, clutching the crooked boat until it blurs. His heart beats so hard he's sure the whole yard must hear it. A girl spoke to him. Asked him for something. Wanted him there.

Hope, small and stubborn, roots itself in his chest before he can stop it. Not hope he dares name. But something close. Very close.

Jonas walks home with the bark boat clutched in his hands, heart still rattling against his ribs. The world feels sharper somehow. The grass brighter, the air sweeter, even the stones underfoot less cruel. A girl had looked at him, spoken to him, and then wanted something from him. Not in mockery, but in earnest. The thought burns warm in his chest. Maybe his parents have been wrong to sigh at him and maybe the tutors were wrong to shake their heads. If Lenne can see worth in him, then perhaps others might too. Perhaps he isn't hopeless. Perhaps he can still be the son his parents want, the husband a Lady could trust. He could *actually* have a dowry. He imagines himself standing straighter, speaking clearer, as though her words alone could smooth his tongue. It feels like proof, shy and fragile but real, that his life might not be condemned to silence after all.

The next day, Jonas walks the narrow path down toward the lake, the bark boat for Lenne tucked carefully in his hands as though it's carved from glass instead of scrap wood. His feet are light on the stones. For once, he doesn't linger behind or cut across the weeds to avoid attention. He's almost giddy, as if a warm current has lifted him and carried him along.

He imagines his parents' faces when they hear. A girl who wanted to meet him again. She may not be from the administrative quarter, with fine shoes and perfect posture, but surely his parents will be pleased. Surely they will see he isn't hopeless, that a wife might still find him worthy. The thought burns so bright it makes his steps quicken, his chest tight with secret delight. Jonas can't *wait* to tell them over supper, his stutter be damned.

When he passes under a small wooden footbridge, he doesn't see the rope stretched overhead until it's too late.

A rush of cold crashes down on him. The bucket tips, water slamming against his scalp and shoulders, soaking his tunic through to the skin. He gasps, staggering back, the bark boat slipping from his hands and snapping underfoot. His breath catches in sharp stutters, the sound humiliating in his ears.

Above him, laughter bursts like fireworks. He blinks upward, water dripping into his eyes. Lenne leans over the railing of the footbridge, her grin wide and cruel in a way he's never seen before. Two other girls huddle close beside her, giggling into their hands.

"Look at him!" One of them squeals, "He really came!"

Lenne holds the rope still in one hand, the empty bucket swinging at her side, "Thought you'd bring me a boat. Guess you did, but now it's sunk!"

The girls explode with laughter again, the sound ringing sharp against the stillness of the lake.

Jonas stands frozen, dripping, too stunned to move. The bark boat is ruined at his feet. His tongue stumbles against his teeth, desperate to speak, to defend himself, but nothing comes. Only the same broken, sputtering fragments. His face burns hotter than the sun.

They've already turned away, already moving off together with their laughter trailing behind them, leaving him sodden and small beneath the bridge.

For a long moment, Jonas just stares at the rippling water of the lake, the reflection trembling where his boat might have floated. The joy he carried with him— so sharp, so impossible— slips away all at once, leaving only the hollow ache of shame.

His throat is tight, his silence heavier than ever.

Jonas sits on the back stoop of his grandparent's cottage, shirt clinging wet to his skin, hair dripping into his eyes. The laughter still echoes, sharp and shrill, as if it might follow him forever. He doesn't cry. Just shivers, shoulders drawn tight and eyes fixed on the worn grain of the step.

His grandmother finds him there. She doesn't gasp, only lowers herself beside him, shawl in hand. She drapes it across his narrow shoulders, the smell of woodsmoke and dried herbs wrapping around him as firmly as the wool. "Don't you mind them," She says, smoothing back his wet hair, "Spirits don't waste breath on cruelty. They see the truth clearer than people do."

Jonas blinks, lips trembling, but no words come.

His grandfather arrives with slow, heavy steps. He squats, tying a scrap of cloth around Jonas's wrist, knotting it careful and sure.

"Ward against spite," he mutters, spitting twice into the dirt, "Spirits favour the quiet-hearted. Walk soft, listen true, and they'll keep you."

The tug of the cloth steadies Jonas. His throat tightens, and this time the tears come. Thin and silent, spilling down his cheeks as Elsie pushes against his shin, purring like she means to drive the laughter

away. His grandmother only hushes him, pressing a kiss to his damp hair, “The forest keeps its own,” she murmurs.

Later, the three of them go to the house together. “There are guardians in the woods,” His grandmother says as he holds onto her hand like it’s a lifeline, “Old ones. If they see someone treated poorly, they’ll step in. Sometimes as a fox, sometimes as a bird. Sometimes as a person. You may not recognise them right away, but you’ll know by how they stay beside you, even when no one else does.”

Jonas swallows, eyes stinging now. The idea lodges deep: The forest watching, the spirits choosing.

When his parents see him, his mother only draws him close with a cloth in hand, rubbing at his arms though her eyes glisten with every stroke. His father kneels at the hearth, setting another log on the fire, keeping his face turned away. At the table, the story comes out in fragments— Lenne, the bucket, the laughter. His mother’s hand rises to her lips, shoulders trembling, but she doesn’t weep aloud.

“This can’t go on,” She says at last, voice quiet but firm, “Not for him.”

His grandparents are silent. Jonas’s stomach churns and he waits for anger, or worse, weary disappointment. Instead, his mother sighs.

“It isn’t fair. The girls, the boys… they’ll only grow crueler. Every year will be harder than the last,” She reaches out, touches his damp hair, but her hand falls away quickly.

As Jonas stares at the floor, he hears his father’s voice cut in.

“There… are houses where boys like Jonas can thrive. He’ll be safe there. Safer than here.”

Eliam from across the room starts to say something, but it comes out as nothing more than a small sound. The reality of what is being said hits harder than the water Lenne dropped on him.

“It doesn’t mean we love you less,” His mother says beside him, “You’ll have food, a roof, people who ask no more than you can give. Isn’t that kinder, Jonas?”

Jonas’s throat aches, but no sound will come. He nods once, stiffly, because they are all waiting for him to respond. Because they are kind and harsh all at once. Because he doesn’t know how else to survive the moment.

He looks up to see his mother wiping at her eyes. His father stirs the fire. His grandparents are whispering to themselves and also wiping their eyes. Eliam stares blankly at the clothes he’s been mending, his hands frozen in the thread. And Jonas learns that sometimes love can sound like mercy, even when it feels like exile.

The morning after comes grey and cool, the kind of day where the mist lingers low to the ground. Jonas sits on the edge of his bed with his small satchel clutched tight, the leather stiff and unfamiliar under his hands. His mother ties the straps twice, fussing with them though they’re already neat. His father waits at the door, jaw set, cloak fastened for the walk into town.

His grandparents arrive early, their steps slow and heavy. His grandmother pulls him into her arms, pressing his cheek against the rough wool of her shawl. She smells of woodsmoke and sage, and her

tears wet the crown of his hair.

“If it were up to me, you’d stay here,” She whispers, her voice breaking, “We’d find a place for you, no matter what.” His grandfather, eyes red-rimmed, pats Jonas’s shoulder with a trembling hand. “Remember your mother’s crap of red cloth,” He says hoarsely, “Keep a scrap by your bed. It wards off crooked dreams.”

But none of it changes what’s already decided. His parents stand side by side, looking solemn. His father smooths his apron, then cups his face gently, “You’ll have a chance there, Jonas. A chance to be steady, to be safe. A place with rules that make sense, where you don’t have to struggle to keep up,” His voice falters, but he forces a smile.

“You’ll be better off,” His mother says after, though her eyes glint as if holding back something heavier.

Jonas doesn’t protest. Deep inside, he already knows: Usefulness is all that matters. A boy who isn’t useful isn’t wanted. If service makes him useful, then that is what he must become.

Eliam lingers behind them, arms folded tight. His usual airs and mimicry are gone today. He scuffs his boot against the floor, glances at Jonas, then looks away too quickly. “I’ll send letters. Every week, if I can,” His voice cracks on the last word, and he covers it with a cough.

Jonas nods, clutching his satchel closer, heart hammering. It feels like it takes forever, and yet it also feels as though no time has passed at all, for the carriage to arrive. Jonas takes small steps toward the door, because he must. Because boys are sent away, be it to a wife or to service, and the only way to matter is to go where they’re told.

The wheels creak as the carriage lurches forward, the horses snorting clouds into the chill air. Jonas sits stiff-backed on the worn bench, satchel pressed to his knees, the road unfurling grey and endless before him. Behind, the cluster of his family blurs in the morning mist. His grandparents wave through tears, his father clutches his apron, his mother's hand resting heavy on his shoulder, Eliam trying to stand tall.

The driver clicks her tongue, and the horses fall into rhythm. The sound of hooves swallows the last murmurs of farewell— Except one. Through the open window, Jonas catches the shift in tone as his parents' voices drop low, already bending toward Eliam's future. A dowry mentioned, prospects weighed. Hopes turned elsewhere, to the son who will stay.

Jonas doesn't turn back. He stares hard at the road, jaw clenched, lips moving soundlessly. The words slip from him in a hush:

Salt to heel, smoke to brow, let no unseen follow now. Let not shadow walk with me.

The rhythm steadies his breath. Only then does the ache break loose. A fresh set of tears slide hot and fast down his cheeks, his chest hitching silently as he tries not to make a sound. He presses his palms hard against his satchel, as though the leather itself could anchor him.

He loves them. He knows he does. They care for him in their way. They believe this is the right choice, maybe even a kindness. He has no place in Merrow's Hill, not anymore. But deep in the quiet part of his heart— the part he rarely dares to touch— another truth coils sharp and bitter.

If he lets himself think about it too long, he thinks he might hate his family, too.

The training grounds for boys like Jonas are tucked behind the back corridors of a noble estate on the edge of town. A quiet annex repurposed for servant instruction, known simply as *the circle*. It is not truly a circle, not in shape, more a converted granary hall lined with cold stone and low windows, but the name comes from the practice: The boys stand in a ring at dawn and again at dusk, bodies bowed, wrists bound, voices low. They enter the ring as chatterboxes and slouchers. They are meant to leave it as still water.

The ribbon discipline is a hallmark. Soft fabric at first— Thin lengths tied around their wrists, binding one hand loosely to the other so that any wild gesture or fumbling movement pulls against the tie. It is not painful, but it makes imbalance visible, and that visibility is the punishment. If the ribbons tug out of place, a boy's name is recorded on the slateboard. Three marks mean kneeling in the corner on raw rice that evening, reciting Stillsong Verses under the breath until knees throb and the tongue stumbles. Jonas is still enough that he never receives that punishment.

They learn to pass dishes in silence, to fold linens without creases, to bow at precisely the third step before a threshold. There are dozens of invisible rules— When to lower the eyes (always with nobles, but not so much that it looks like sulking), how to soften the voice to a domestic register (meant to soothe mistresses), and how to listen even when not being addressed. Boys who fidget or mutter are tapped on the back of the head with a hooked cane. Nothing cruel, but sharp enough to sting.

The expectation of quiet perfection makes Jonas's stutter stand out like a snapped thread in a silk weave. He dreads the exercises in elocution, where boys must greet imaginary ladies and ask after their health in courtly tones. His words catch, tumble, stick in his throat like dry bread, and when he falters, others laugh… Though only when the matron is not looking.

Still, he persists. Still, he is exemplary at anything that doesn't include speaking.

He finds solace in the quiet tasks. He is good with fabrics, his fingers deft when folding serviettes into the Dominion-standard lilies. He remembers things quickly and takes careful notes when permitted paper. He learns to anticipate before being asked, a highly prized trait among boys in the lower ranks. A quick learner, if not a smooth talker. Quiet, if not graceful.

One older boy once hisses at him in the washing room, "You're like a ghost, you know. Can't even hear you breathe." He means it cruelly. Nothing good comes from ghosts and Jonas is afraid of them. But he still takes it to heart, and turns it into a compliment. Ghosts don't stutter. Ghosts are quiet and unseen and move through the world untouched. He can be that.

And so he does not speak unless spoken to. He tucks his stammer behind the chores, behind the rhythm of brushing boots and folding linens, behind bowed heads and wordless smiles. He survives, and he learns. It isn't affection that gets him assigned to The Lady's estate, it is his carefulness. His willingness to disappear into duty.

It isn't *kindness* that saves him. But it is enough.

When he begins working at the Lady's estate, wrists still bound in ribbons for a time before he can 'prove' himself and still dismayed over the lack of cats in the house, Jonas begins receiving Eliam's letters on a semi-frequent basis. They arrive smudged with ink, sometimes creased from too many hands, always written in Eliam's neat but hurried hand. At first, the letters are full of promises: How he

will visit, how they will share stories of their new lives, how distance won't fray the thread between them. Jonas clutches those words close, reading them until the parchment softens under his fingers.

But as the years pass, the promises continue but nothing actually happens. Eliam also writes of his work mending and sewing, of the matrons who come to the shop, of how he keeps his head bowed and his voice smooth, just as they were taught. Eventually, Jonas reads the line that changes everything: *I am to wed. The innkeeper, Lina. Not the match I dreamt, as you know I was hoping to catch the eye of a noble. But it's the match that came.*

After that, the tone of Eliam's letters shifts again. He writes of the inn, of the ceaseless labour, of accounts that never quite balance. He mentions his wife often. At the time of their marriage, she is twice the age of his brother. From Eliam's letters she is sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, and seemingly always finding fault. Yet, Eliam letters remain enthusiastic. Always chasing some genteel dream.

Jonas reads and rereads those passages in silence, feeling a complicated weight in his chest. He does not take joy in his brother's life not quite turning out how he wanted. But there is a kind of bleak comfort in knowing Eliam has not been lifted high, paraded before the world as a noble's chosen husband. Instead, Eliam is tethered to a small life, sharp with criticism and dulled with work, despite what the letters might say. Not so different from Jonas's own lot, in its way.

For the first time, Jonas begins to see his brother not as someone far ahead, untouchable, but as someone caught too. Bound in a life that doesn't fit, bound by expectations that bite as hard as ribbons. He does not gloat. He does not resent. He only breathes a little easier, knowing they both ended up elsewhere than they had hoped. Neither son became what he wanted.

And somehow, that makes Jonas feel less alone.

Jonas finds it tucked between a wobbly drawer and a moth-nibbled blanket chest in one of the linen closets— A frayed, tea-stained copy that has clearly passed through too many hands, the cover half-peeled and ink smudged by steam or time. *The Genteel Standard,* it declares in gilded embossment, though the letters have faded to a tarnished brown. The issue number is unreadable. He smuggles it back to his cot like contraband.

THE GENTEEL STANDARD

Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661

FEATURE: 'Grace in Miniature: Refining the Young Male Temperament'

It is a truth long affirmed by the Matronal Courts: A gentle husband begins with a gentle boy.

This edition's feature explores proven methods for cultivating softness in sons and servants. Highlights include:

- *The Ribbon Drill:*
  Begin with silks for younger boys. Have them tie bow-knots with gloved fingers to develop patience and elegance in motor habits.

- Morning Readings of Quiet Verse:
  Daily recitations of the Litany of Composure instill reverence. Reward clarity with a kiss to the temple. Hesitations should be gently corrected with a gloved tap.

- The Apron Test:
  Present the boy with two identical aprons—one clean, one starched. See which he selects. A properly obedient child will wait to be instructed.

“Obedience is not silence alone,” writes Lady Marrivelle, Third Chair of the Academy of Matronal Studies. “It is trust made visible.”

ETIQUETTE TIP: ‘The Gentle Tongue Knows When to Still’

When a man speaks too quickly, or attempts cleverness, encourage pause with the phrase:

“The table does not need your voice, darling, only your hands.”

MORAL TALE: ‘The Wayward Apron’

A cautionary piece suitable for mealtime reflection.

A young servant boy, eager to impress, starches his own cuffs before his mistress wakes. He believes neatness is next to virtue—but forgets that virtue is always granted, not taken.

His cuffs crack as he pours tea, and his mistress notices. She does not raise her voice. She simply gestures toward the sewing bench.

The boy kneels for six hours in atonement, his apron soaking with tears.

In the end, she forgives him. She even allows him to stitch her slippers.

But he never starches unbidden again.

Jonas read it three times, then a fourth.

He doesn’t entirely understand why starching cuffs is such an offense. But the image of the boy kneeling, forgiven at last, clings to him like damp linen.

The *Standard* is, by all accounts, absurd. The prose is syrupy, the illustrations strange, the morality plays condescending at best. He reads another story titled *"Weeping Husband,"* about a man who is punished not for wrongdoing, but for showing too much emotion in front of dinner guests. The *"Six Temptations of Idle Boys"* includes reading without permission and singing above a whisper— Both offences Jonas is, apparently, naturally prone to as a boy.

And yet.

He reads it over and over, long after the wax stub on his bedside tray burns down. *The Genteel Standard* becomes a lifeline, not because it tells the truth, but because it pretends to know how the world works. The voices inside its pages are confident and precise. Untroubled by stutters. They explain etiquette, household hierarchies, even seasonal recipes with such assurance that Jonas can't help but lean in. He knows the domestic manuals in the back rooms by heart— how to starch a ruffle, how to calculate the number of oranges needed for formal luncheons. But this? This is something else. A peek into the genteel world he serves but never enters.

He is not allowed to read The Lady's books. Those sit under lock and key, high in polished walnut cases behind the drawing room's mirrored doors. Even pausing too long near them can earn a warning. But discarded *Genteel Standards*? Those find their way into laundry baskets, crumpled behind wardrobes, or passed hand-to-hand like gossip among lower servants. Sometimes Jonas catches a glimpse of newer issues folded in a gardener's coat or traded between scullery boys. He quietly waits for them to be discarded before taking them.

He keeps them beneath his cot, stacked between handkerchiefs and rolled stockings. He reads about proper posture and mulberry jam. About morning rituals and *"what every young man must learn if he is to be worth his apron."* And though much of it feels like mockery, like being held at arm's length by a laughing crowd, he still reads. Because it is something he can have. Something that isn't taken from him.

He reads many issues over the years. Most are ridiculous. Patronizing. Even cruel. But they are something he is allowed to read.

By the time he is nineteen and has a… friendship? Maybe? With a certain Hunting Marshal, Jonas has probably read hundreds of *Genteel Standards.* It is a quiet afternoon, before his brother's visit, when he finds a moment to read the latest edition that he finds discarded in a bin.

THE GENTEEL STANDARD
Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661
Issue No. 3,178 – The Mourning Dove Edition

FEATURE: 'Firm Hands, Gentle Hearts: When to Discipline the Domestic Husband'

A woman's authority must be as tender as it is unyielding. As noted by the Academy of Matronal Studies, "Too much softness and the house rots. Too much hardness and the embroidery frays."

Appropriate Correctional Measures Include:

- *The Palm Tap: A light disciplinary swat delivered with a silver spoon or hairbrush. Should be administered only after a pause for eye contact.*

- *The Kneeling Hour: A restorative measure wherein the husband kneels facing a wall to reflect on transgressions. Slippers removed to enhance sincerity.*

- *The Public Collar: A soft-stitched ruff or velvet ribbon tied around the neck to signal atonement during formal gatherings. Must be removed by wife only.*

"Correction is not cruelty," writes Lady Vintress of Argyll. "It is devotion expressed in firmness."

NEW COLUMN: 'The Humoural Constellations' – Noble Woman's Guide to Householdharmony through the Stars

By Astrologienne-General Ysadora Thistlewhite

In noble society, every season corresponds to a ruling star, and thus, a Humoural Constellation, believed to influence a husband's temperament, emotional volatility, and preferred chores.

Constellations of Note This Season:

- *The Swan of Vinevale (March–May) – Men born under this constellation tend toward weepiness and baking. Must be given structured emotional tasks and gentle morning correction.*

- *The Indigo Mare (June–August) – These husbands are quick to jealousy and poor with linens. Best handled through mild restraint and cold-foot bathing.*

- *The Bound Fox (September–November) – Clever but stubborn. Shy with strangers. Keep them busy with endless folding and avoid allowing them opinions about history or religion.*

- *The Lantern Stag (December–February) – Loyal but slow-witted.*

Good with children and apples. Prone to silent brooding and must be touched at least thrice daily.

ADVICE COLUMN: Ask Matron Lys

Q: My husband blushed in public due to someone complimenting him. What do I do?
A: This is the earliest stage of rebellion. Avoid shame. Instead, quietly take his hand, place it over his own heart, and whisper, "Remember who it beats for." If repeated, reduce his sweets.

Supplemental Insert: 'The Twelve Chore Spirits and Their Blessings'

A whimsical calendar for wives: Assign each month a sacred task— mending, dusting, fruit preservation— to focus a husband's energies. Comes with embroidery patterns for wall display.

Jonas lingers over the *The Humoural Constellations* page longer than he means to. He is part of *The Bound Fox*. *"Clever but stubborn. Shy with strangers. Keep them busy with endless folding and avoid allowing them opinions about history or religion."* The words make his stomach twist strangely, not in disagreement, but in a quiet, uneasy recognition. Clever is far too generous, surely, and he isn't sure if he's necessarily stubborn… but the rest, *yes,* perhaps. Certainly uneasy with strangers and he definitely doesn't have any opinions on history or religion. And isn't folding always the safest thing? A handkerchief. A pillowcase. A serviette with corners that aligned just so.

"Jonas."

He nearly drops the issue, yelping softly.

Branwen squints at the paper in his hands, a slight twitch on her lips, “You read that a lot, huh?”

Jonas flushes and tries to fold it shut before accidentally dropping it, “I-I—it’s— n-nothing.”

Branwen snatches it before he can pick it up and flips through the pages, scoffing aloud at an article he hasn’t read yet.

“‘Encourage gratitude and posture’? What do they think men are, overgrown birds?” She pauses on an etiquette column, *“‘Darling, I asked for silence, not performance.’”* She reads it out loud with exaggerated sweetness, then wrinkles her nose, “Do you believe any of this?”

Jonas shrugs, still pink, “I d-don’t know. N-not… all of it.” If it were anyone else, he’d be dreading mockery and laughs, but with Branwen… he… just *knows* she doesn’t think of him as any lesser. No Elsie but he has— her. The thought makes his face feel warmer.

Branwen looks at him, then at the creased magazine in her hand. She shakes it lightly.

“You know they toss these out like orange peels, right? Not even the *genteel* men believe half this rubbish, and they’re the ones kneeling at their wives’ feet. You ever seen a domestic wearing one of those ridiculous collars?” She jabs the page, *“‘Soft-stitched ruff’?* Looks like a goose exploded.”

Jonas gives a small laugh at that. It’s more breath than sound, but it counts.

Branwen flips back to the front, squinting at the header. “Also, who are these women with three husbands and time for celestial laundry charts? Am I supposed to feel inferior because I don’t have a chore spirit for ‘dusting’?”

She hands it back to him and shakes her head, biting down a grin, “Trashy gossip wrapped in perfume.”

Jonas smooths the paper carefully. He’s not entirely sure why his heart is beating just a little faster.

“…Still,” Branwen adds after a moment, “I can see why you read it.”

“Y-you… c-can?”

Branwen shrugs, “Sure. It’s orderly. Rhymes, rules, pretty words. Feels like the world makes sense when it’s printed like that.”

Jonas blinks, not quite knowing how to respond. That’s exactly how he feels, too. She– *Understands.* She just *gets it.* And again, not a single hint of mockery. It makes his heart do a little jump.

“Doesn’t mean the world actually works that way, though.”

He hesitates, chewing the inside of his cheek. Then, almost too quietly, “Wh-what about… y-you? Y-Your c-constellation?”

“Mine?” Branwen huffs, the sound dangerously close to a chuckle, *“Standard* doesn’t care about women’s stars. We’re just supposed to

keep you lot in line. But… I read something once. Not the *Standard,* some old village almanac. Said women's constellations don't rule chores, but tempers. Mine would be the *Elk of Stormfen,* same season as the mare. Makes me blunt. Hot-tempered. Good at lifting more than I should."

Jonas's eyes widen, his voice coming out entirely earnest, "Th-that… f-fits."

Branwen smirks, "It's nonsense, Jonas. But I'll admit, *Elk of Stormfen* sounds better than *Indigo Mare,* don't you think?"

He nods quickly, the corners of his mouth twitching. At the mention of the *Indigo Mare,* he thinks of what season that constellation relates to. June to August. He almost outright gasps— Summer. They're in summer right now. *Has her birthday come yet?! What if— The spiced honey-cake…!*

He's unable to ask her about her birthday, too tongue-tied and flustered, and Branwen bids him goodbye as she has work to do. Her voice lingers, however. A different kind of order. Not printed rules, but the comfort of someone seeing him. She mocked the nonsense and not him, yet answering his shy question anyway.

Jonas folds the paper neatly, careful not to crease an illustration of a woman disciplining her husband. The *Standard* will make its way back to the laundry shelf, like always. Perhaps someone else will read it next, or perhaps it will line a kennel or soak up a spill.

Branwen bids him farewell to attend to a stablehand, and Jonas needs to go back into the main house. He stands, brushing dust from his trousers, and moves to the doorway.

And there he pauses.

Just for a moment, at the threshold. The hallway beyond is dim and still. There is nothing waiting for him beyond here but linen and silence. Yet something in the back of his mind, it isn't quite fear, nor comfort either, makes him glance over his shoulder to take one more look at Branwen as she walks the opposite direction. Jonas steps backward. Not far. Just enough to shift his path into the patch of clean light beside it. He makes no sound. He presses a hand over his wool token. Doesn't speak to himself either, just saying the line in his head while thinking of her. Just adjusting. And walks on.

For the first time in years, the ache of family and duty eases, just a little.

Chapter End Notes

I'm looking forward to the next chapter. Hee hee hoo hoo.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It starts small. Somewhat.

A shoulder brushing his too hard in the passage near the kitchens. The broom left across the scullery threshold. The ladle with the warped handle tucked into the drawer where he'll reach for it first. All things that have been happening for some time now.

None of it is worth naming. Not aloud.

He tells himself not to mind it. That it will pass eventually, like a bad draft in the halls despite how long it's been now. That if he stays quiet and steady, if he doesn't give them anything to grip, it will slide off his back like soap from wet porcelain.

But soap doesn't bruise. And Merrill's elbow in the corridor does.

Jonas doesn't say anything. His silence isn't surrender. It's the only thing he trusts not to betray him. His voice, his traitor of a voice, breaks in all the worst ways when he needs it most.

And they know it. Of course they do.

It does not pass. Jonas never *truly* believed it would pass so easily despite what he tries telling himself, but the escalation still surprises

him. The mockery grows louder.

He hears them before he sees them.

Merrill and Fenn gather near the pantry stairwell, their words pitched just light enough to pretend innocence. They slip into a fake stutter as he passes.

“Can’t h-h-hear him over the p-pots. Must be st-st-still thinking up his next apology.”

A peel of laughter. The sharp kind, like knives tapping together.

Jonas turns down the hall, clutching the folded linens tighter to his chest. They’re still warm and damp. He focuses on that. The weight, the smell of lavender starch. Something steady. Something real. He doesn’t look back. He tries not to flinch, that one is much harder to achieve.

But something in him curls. Folds tighter.

He keeps walking, down the side corridor used by servants, past the cracked plaster where the walls haven’t been properly mended in years, past the fraying edge of the rug where his heel always catches, past the etched line in the stone where someone, years ago, carved a mark he once traced with his thumb.

He knows they’ll follow him. Not with their feet, but with their voices. With their damn laughter.

He passes Branwen near the courtyard arch later in the day. She doesn't say anything. Just looks up from where she's scraping mud off her boots and meets his eyes, steady and silent. He doesn't speak to her either, not this time. But he holds that look a moment too long.

Because some part of him, small and frightened, is beginning to ache with the weight of staying quiet.

He doesn't blame Branwen. Jonas tells himself that often.

She'd said it quiet, without heat. No edge to it, *"I can't fight all your battles."*

He nods, even to himself as he recollects the memory like a gramophone on repeat. He swallows around the dry stone lodged in his throat. She's done so much already, more than anyone else has ever tried. But something about the way she looks at him makes it worse. Not because she's cruel, but because she means it. Because she might actually trust him to hold his own ground.

He isn't sure he does.

"But I'm not magic, Jonas."

But— *she is.* To him she is. Jonas can't shake that belief off, no matter how much he replays her words.

One morning, someone takes his seat at the servant's table. Not by

mistake. One of the maids, she looks him right in the face and puts her tray down anyway, all grace and teeth.

“Oh,” She says lightly, “Didn’t see you there.”

Another pair of eyes flick to his, then away, pretending nothing.

So he eats standing, leaning against the pantry door, trying not to look at the stool as if it matters. He’s tired of pretending it doesn’t.

Later, when he’s fetching eggs from the kitchen, another servant— a fellow named Garrit, he thinks— “accidentally” clips the back of his heel hard enough to make him stagger.

Jonas nearly drops the basket. One egg cracks against the rim, the shell crumbling in his grip.

Garrit grins crooked, “Careful, Knotjaw. Thought you were the quiet type. That little noise just now, sounded nearly like a yelp.”

Jonas says nothing. The words in his chest are too sharp to speak without bleeding.

It’s not just Merrill and Fenn anymore. He feels it spreading, like smoke curling from one log to another, catching quick. A herd mentality. People who never spared him a glance before now try their strength on him, because it costs them nothing. And why not? He’s already marked as easy. A target makes the pack feel bigger.

He leaves the broken egg where it is. He'll clean it later.

There was a time— weeks ago, not long after Hearthurn— when he would have found Branwen. Said nothing, just hovered close until she noticed his silence was heavier than usual. And he knows she would have noticed. She'd have squinted sideways at him, maybe flicked a bit of hay at his shoulder, muttered something like, *"Use your spine."* And then he would believe her to be a spirit envoy who would make it all better regardless.

And that would have been enough. Somehow.

But now—

Now he doesn't go to her.

Because she's said what she's said. And because he's trying to believe her.

He isn't a child but gods, he still feels like one. Like he's always one word, one stumble, one cracked egg away from unravelling. That evening, he sees the others clustered near the hearth in the servant's quarters. They're laughing about something, eyes darting just a little too knowingly when he walks by. He keeps his back straight, hands folded and posture precise. As if perfection might be armour. It isn't.

But still, he doesn't stop. He keeps walking.

And in his chest, something grows. A kind of quiet heat.

The morning hum of the hall is louder than usual, spoons scraping bowls, chatter bouncing off low beams. The air is thick with steam from porridge and stew, the faint tang of woodsmoke, and the yeasty warmth of yesterday's loaves stacked in baskets along the wall. Boots scuff against the flagstone floor, benches groan as bodies shift, and every so often someone barks a laugh sharp enough to turn heads.

Jonas sits low at the long bench that wasn't taken away from him. His shoulders hunch tight, and he keeps his gaze fixed on the rough grain of the table. His fingers worry a crust of bread, tearing it into careful pieces so it doesn't crumble into his lap. He doesn't taste it.

Eliam's visit still weighs on him, heavy as lead in the pit of his stomach, and Branwen's words echo sharp in the back of his mind. The stew cooling in front of him might as well be stone.

Fenn sprawls into place with his usual swagger, Merrill close at his side. They laugh about something half-whispered, eyes flicking again too obviously toward Jonas. He doesn't meet them. He just spoons at his porridge and tries to eat quickly.

They sit down across from him.

"Careful, Knotjaw," Merrill says, leaning across the table, "Wouldn't want you to choke. What would your— what, *brother*— think?" The word hangs, thick with the memory of them making him drop that stupid tincture. Jonas swallows hard and keeps his eyes on the bowl.

But Merrill isn't finished. He stretches for the butter, elbow intentionally sweeping wide. Jonas's plate tips and spills. The bread and porridge slop onto the floor. The bowl cracks against the stones.

“Oh,” Merrill says, mock-surprised, *“So* sorry about that.”

Fenn snickers.

Jonas freezes, cheeks hot and hands half-raised. He wants to speak— anything— but Branwen’s voice scrapes raw inside him. *“I can’t fight all your battles.”* He bends down instead, cleans what he can with a rag. The bread is ruined, the bowl beyond saving. A few of the younger servants pass through, casting sidelong glances but not stopping. It’s easier to slip by, easier not to get caught in the splash of things. Jonas feels it, if he doesn’t become a target to them, he’s just some background noise in their eyes, something to avoid tripping over.

“Clumsy thing,” Fenn says, loud enough for the nearby tables, “Maybe he should eat on the floor anyway. That’d fit him well, being the Hunting Marshal’s favourite dog.”

Jonas’s jaw tightens. He doesn’t lift his head.

The laughter trails after him all morning. No stables or kennels to disappear into today— He’s polishing brass in the main house. Fenn and Merrill hover, hounding him. Merrill sings sweetly as he passes, “Shame that rag can’t scrub your tongue clean.” Fenn nudges his bucket so water sloshes over his boots.

By noon Jonas is trembling with hunger, having wiped the same rail three times just to keep his hands busy. Fenn tosses an apple core into his fresh water. Merrill “accidentally” drops porcelain for Jonas to gather. Little cruelties, constant as gnats.

Then at supper, his body aches, his throat raw though he hasn't spoken. He files into the servants' hall, shoulders tight. The smell of stew and barley bread hangs heavy, voices rumbling around him, but every scrape of spoon sounds too sharp. Merrill lingers around him before sitting, bowl in hand, smiling that crooked half-smile.

"Well, look at him," Merrill says, loud and easy, "Our little whore. Sitting prim, waiting quiet, like The Lady herself might come down and give him a pat. Favouritism suits you, Jonas."

Jonas lowers his eyes, knuckles whitening on his bowl. His chest feels raw.

"I—" He tries, voice a frayed thread.

Merrill cuts in suddenly, "Oh, he speaks! Go on, then. Or can't you? The Hunting Marshal not here to tug your leash?" His laugh cuts low.

Jonas stares at the stew. Words coil sharp in his chest but collapse before they form. He swallows them. That is— until Merrill leans back in his seat, speaking louder still, "Tell me, Knotjaw, how nice is it to warm her bed?"

Jonas stares at the table, at the half-finished stew cooling in front of him, and something inside him twists. His spoon lies useless at the rim of the bowl. The broth's skin glimmers in the lamplight, untouched, as voices rattle around him. Laughter too sharp and easy. It pricks like thorns against his skin.

It's every supper where his mother's smile grew tight as he stumbled over a word.

It's every test of speech, every well-meaning correction, every look of pity… Every look of mockery.

It's every time Eliam got attention over him.

It's the bucket of water that drenched him while girls laughed from the rafters.

It's the carriage ride away from home, mouthing wards over and over like they might keep the shame from following.

It's years convincing himself that he is better off silent. Better off invisible.

And still— *still*— he is laughed at.

Still the boy everyone thinks they can push down, speak over, dump their work on.

Still the easy target. The one who won't fight back. The one who cannot.

The pressure builds hot in his chest, until it feels like he's choking on more than just the stutter. He's choking on years of being less. Of being the weak one, the broken one, the one who ought to accept his place. Every breath burns like it will sear his throat raw. His hands tremble against the table's edge, nails biting into wood. A storm rising, coiled tight, trapped for years behind his teeth.

Across from him, Merrill grins, smug and certain of the outcome, as if Jonas will do what he's always done. Lower his head. Say nothing. Take it.

But something in Jonas— *Snaps.*

His palms slam the table. A sharp crack splits through the hall, loud enough to startle spoons against bowls. Merrill jerks. So do half the others.

Jonas surges to his feet, voice ripping free, cracked but fierce—

"Sh-shut up!"

The sound shocks even him. It tears the air, raw and shaking, but louder than he's ever let himself be. His throat feels scraped bloody, his whole body trembling, but for once, the words are out. Unhidden and unswallowed.

Merrill's smirk actually falters.

His voice explodes across the table, startling more than a few heads up from their bowls. Jonas's breath shudders but he forces the words out, each one jagged, torn, but louder than the last, "Sh-Shut your m-mouth, M-Merrill! Y-you d-don't g-get to—" The stutter tears at him, jagged, but he pushes through it, his voice raw and blazing, "Y-you don't g-get to ta–talk like t-that!"

The hall stills. Stew cools in untouched bowls, eyes dart between them. Merrill sits back, lips parted, surprise flashing quick before he masks it with another grin. It's thinner this time, less sure, but still

infuriating.

Jonas's chest heaves. His hands shake against the table, but he doesn't look away. For once, he lets the silence that follows be his.

"Watch yourself, Knotjaw—"

Jonas doesn't.

His fist moves before he even realises it.

Knuckles crash against Merrill's cheek with a clean, ugly thud. The sound rings louder than it should, sharp as a hammer strike. For a heartbeat, the whole hall inhales at once. Benches scrape, spoons clatter, a sharp gasp rises from the corner. Heads whip toward the sound, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

Merrill jerks sideways, clutching his face and eyes wide in shock. Jonas stands frozen, arm still half-raised like he doesn't quite believe what he's done. His hand throbs, bones singing with pain he doesn't care about, chest heaving like he's just run miles. His pulse hammers so hard he feels it in his teeth.

He's never hit anyone in his life. Never. His training had been ribbons at the wrist, stillness, balance, and learning to be silent. A servant's hands are meant for carrying, for folding, for polishing until every edge gleams. Not this. *Never this.*

And yet— here he is. Standing in the middle of the supper hall, every pair of eyes on him. His knuckles ache. His whole body shakes.

The moment breaks and chaos surges in. Jonas lunges again before he can think, fists stiff and clumsy, each swing carrying years of frustration, humiliation, and swallowed words. Merrill doesn't hesitate. He swings back, sneering, and the two collide in a tangle of limbs.

Bowls and platters rattle as they crash into a table. Bread rolls scatter. Porridge slops in thick globs onto the floor. The smell of stew and sweat mixes into something suffocating. Jonas tastes copper where he's bitten his cheek, his ears ringing with a deafening sound. Adrenaline roars through him, drowning out the fear and shame that usually governs him.

The fight is messy. Punches land half-formed, arms flail, legs kick blindly. Jonas takes a hard one to the ribs and doubles over, breath knocked from him, but fury drags him upright. He slams back, wild and reckless, surprising even himself with the force of it. Merrill yelps as he staggers, then shoves Jonas against the bench hard enough to rattle the wood.

It's release, pure and terrible. Every shove, every strike is years of mockery, every sneer and snicker, every cracked egg and stolen seat. He isn't fighting Merrill alone. He's fighting his brother's quick tongue, his mother's tight smile, every time someone decided his stutter meant he wasn't good enough. Jonas's chest feels like it might split open. His breath comes ragged, sharp, but he doesn't stop. He doesn't care about the rules, or who's watching, or what comes after. He only knows the burning need to strike back, to show them he isn't invisible, he isn't small, he isn't broken.

Merrill's fist catches him square across the face.

Stars explode in Jonas's vision, hot pain flaring along his cheekbone. He sways, nearly drops, but the sting only fuels the roar in his chest.

He bares his teeth, goes to swing again—

—and suddenly, he's yanked back. Arms clamp around him, iron-tight. He thrashes, kicking, but the grip doesn't budge. Through the blur, he sees Merrill hauled the same way, cursing and struggling, cheek already swelling where Jonas's first blow landed.

"Enough!"

The word slices through the chaos, sharp as steel. Maud stands in the archway, cheeks flushed and eyes blazing. Her voice cracks like a whip, "In my office. *Now!"*

Every nerve in Jonas's body tightens. His chest pounds, still thrumming with the adrenaline of the fight, but the moment of reckoning crushes the wild freedom he felt seconds ago. Merrill's smirk is gone, replaced by a mask of disbelief and anger, but neither man dares speak.

They are corralled by guards, shoved forward, and the mess of toppled tables, scattered bread, and splattered porridge is left behind like a battlefield. Jonas's jaw aches, his eye burns, and his knuckles throb, but despite the bruises and the looming punishment, there's a stubborn spark in him. The adrenaline fades slowly, leaving him trembling and raw, yet somewhere deep inside, he doesn't regret a single swing.

Even as Maud's glare pins him in place, Jonas knows he's pushed back. He's pushed back against everything that's belittled him for years, and for a moment, that feels like a quiet victory amid the fear.

The so-called office is more of a glorified broom cupboard.

A low-beamed room just off the back stairwell, barely large enough for the desk, two stools, and a crooked shelf stacked with old rotas and scrap parchment. A narrow window lets in some waning daylight, enough to see the dust. Enough to see Maud's fury.

She doesn't speak at first. Just paces behind the desk in silence, arms folded, jaw tight enough to cut thread.

Jonas sits stiffly on the stool to the left, head down. His entire face aches. Merrill slouches in the other, one eye purpling, arms crossed like a sulking child. When Maud finally speaks, it's in the quietest, most dangerous voice Jonas has ever heard from her.

"You brawled in my kitchen."

Merrill rolls his shoulders, "It wasn't—"

"Do not finish that sentence," She snaps.

He shuts his mouth. Jonas takes small pleasure from that, but Maud glares at them both, "You are lucky, *very* lucky, that you did this in the servant kitchen. If a guest had seen— if The Lady had seen—" She breaks off, unable to even finish the sentence.

Jonas swallows when she turns to him, "And you, Jonas. I expected better."

That hurts more than the punch.

“You’ve been here years. You know the rules. You know what this place demands of you. There are servants, good ones, who’ve been dismissed for far less than what I saw today. You want to ruin all of it over some stupid, schoolyard scrap?”

He can’t meet her eyes.

She turns on Merrill, “And you. Do you have any idea how many complaints I’ve fielded about your mouth? About your temper? You’re not tenured here. You’re not protected. One more incident, and I will personally pack your trunk.”

Merrill mutters, “He hit first.”

“You baited him. Don’t think I haven’t heard the things you say.”

The silence that follows is brutal. Eventually, Maud sighs, rubbing her temples. Her voice drops again, “You will not be dismissed. I’ll convince the head cook and steward to hold off. For now.”

Jonas blinks in quiet relief. But her next words flatten him.

“You will, however, be punished.”

She pauses to let it settle.

“Properly.”

The room chills. Maud looks at them like a judge with no patience for tears, “It will be formal. Documented. You will report tomorrow after supper to the steward’s hall. There, under the usual witness, you’ll each receive a caning. Across the rear. Ten lashes apiece.”

Merrill gasps, “T-Ten? Isn’t six the standard—”

“Would you prefer a proper dismissal?”

He goes quiet, again. Maud mutters then, low but sharp, now not even looking at them, *“Men.* Too emotional by half. No composure, no discipline. Can’t trust you lot to keep your tempers in check.”

Jonas fidgets in his seat. This will be his first ever punishment. He’s never witnessed one either, but he’s seen the aftermath of some, rare as they are. The Lady does not have her servants caned often, which further cements deep in Jonas’s gut how serious this is. He’s seen how servants who have been caned sometimes struggle to walk or do their duties for quite some time as their body heals.

Maud turns back to Jonas, “You knew better. You let him provoke you. And now, whether it was right or not, you’ve dragged your name through the muck. You want respect from the other staff? This won’t help.”

Jonas’s face burns hot, the heat climbing from his throat to his ears. He keeps his eyes fixed on the floor, but his jaw works tight. Inwardly, the words twist and sour. She doesn’t understand. None of them do. They speak as if silence were a shield, as if lowering his head would somehow keep him safe. He’s done that, years of it, and still the jabs found him, still the laughter followed. Nothing changes by swallowing

it down. Nothing. Ignoring Merrill and Fenn only makes them bolder, hungrier.

They will never stop.

The thought scrapes bitter in his chest. They'll keep picking him apart until there's nothing left, unless he shows them he can strike back. Unless he makes them think twice. This— his voice, his fist— it's the only way to shake them off. The only way to be *free.*

"Dismissed," She says, "Both of you."

They stand. Jonas nods stiffly, pain briefly shooting through his bruised ribs. Merrill mutters something under his breath that Maud doesn't catch, or chooses not to.

As they leave the cramped office and return to the servant quarters, Jonas can feel the eyes of the other servants on him. For once, it's not outright hostile. Not pitying either. Just… watching.

For the entirety of the next day, he tries to brace himself for his punishment. But nothing can really prepare him for how it will feel.

They make him strip to the waist and drop his trousers to mid-thigh.

Jonas stands stiff in the centre of the steward's hall, palms white on the edge of the receiving frame. It's an old oak fixture bolted into the flagstone floor, scarred from years of use. The padded bar waits for his

weight, leather cracked but still firm, and the handholds are worn smooth by decades of other grips. High, narrow windows let in a murky daylight, cutting pale stripes across the floor. Shadows pool in the corners, where old cabinets hold record-books and bundles of spare quills.

A ledger lies open on the steward's desk, neat columns ready to record another line of discipline. Two witnesses stand nearby— steward and second cook— stone-faced, silent, their gazes fixed anywhere but on him. Merrill lingers off to the side, one eye bruised and arms folded, watching with a grim detachment Jonas refuses to meet.

Somewhere on the wall, a clock ticks. Each click of its mechanism lands sharp in the stillness, a metronome marking time until the first strike. Jonas counts them without meaning to, jaw tight, as if the sound alone were winding up the cane. The hall feels colder than the rest of the house, built to amplify that silence, to make him wait.

He braces his hands tighter. Ten. That's what Maud ordered. Not the usual six. Ten because, after years of keeping his head down, that small crack in the trust snapped and the measure was raised.

The clock ticks. The steward gives the signal.

The first lash comes and the world tilts. It strikes across the top of his rear like a hot iron; Jonas jerks forward, a sound ripping out of him that he can't swallow. The pain blooms— bright, white, instant— and then it settles into a deeper, gnawing hotness.

The second is lower and harder. He doubles over, breath tearing in. He clamps his teeth until his lip splits; warm salt pricks his tongue where he bit it.

He tells himself not to cry. He tells himself to breathe slowly. *Salt to heel, smoke to brow.* He breathes in, out. He squeezes the bar until his fingers ache.

Third. Dead centre. The world narrows to a single point of agony that radiates down his thighs. His knees shudder but hold.

The witnesses don't flinch. That is their job. The steward's face is a flat, unreadable mask as she raises the cane again and again.

Fourth. Fifth.

By the sixth lash his legs are trembling. The first haze of vertigo comes; the edges of the hall lean away. His fingers cramp around the wood. He pretends the pain is for someone else, some other boy, some other life. It is a trick that does not work.

There is no clean release. There is no flood of adrenaline to carry him through. This is measured pain: cold, indifferent and relentless. The cane drops with a patience that is worse than fury. Each stroke separates another layer of quiet from him, and breaks the skin.

Seventh. Eighth.

A strangled noise breaks free, small and ashamed, and he hates himself for making it. He feels the blood behind his eyes and the sweat slick at his temples. He wants to curl into himself, to be small and invisible again, but his hands keep gripping the bar.

Ninth.

He is panting now, breath sharp and ragged. The burn runs like liquid fire from the marks down into the backs of his thighs; every heartbeat is a flare. His whole lower body feels unmoored, foreign, as if someone has swapped his legs for carved poles. A thin trickle of blood breaks free from the broken skin.

Tenth.

The final lash cuts across already raw skin, a ripping, searing line that forces an involuntary, choking sound from his chest. His legs almost give; his hands slide on the wood. It is over.

For a terrible, suspended second there is nothing but the echo of the cane and the desperate thudding of his heart. The steward makes a note in the ledger. The clock ticks again. The witnesses exchange no word. Maud's instruction— formal, documented, ten lashes— has been executed to the letter.

"Get up," The steward says.

Jonas lets go of the frame. His hands are slick with sweat. He fumbles for his trousers; the coarse fabric rasping over the fresh welts sends a white-hot shock through him that makes him gasp. Even the smallest movement is a blade. He can barely pull at his belt, and when the rough cloth meets his skin the pain flares again, angry and bright. He cannot stand straight. He ties the belt as best he can, fingers shaking so badly that it's clumsy. He steps aside, each motion a fight. One foot, then the other. His face pales and it becomes a raw, grey mask. His jaw is so tightly set it aches.

The steward does not dismiss him with a look. She does not meet Jonas's eye.

Now it is Merrill's turn. Jonas does not stay to watch. He leaves the hall in stiff, uneven steps, each footfall a reminder of the fresh, burning lines across him. The corridor air feels colder than it should; the stones press against the soles of his boots like accusation. No one offers a hand. No one catches his eye.

He hears Merrill scream out in pain almost immediately.

Jonas stiffly limps away, every step a jolt in his hips. The steward's hall empties into one of the estate's long service corridors, narrow but still lined with the trappings of wealth. The plaster walls rise high above him, cool and pale under the glow of sconces. Heavy gilt frames hang evenly spaced: Oil portraits of severe women with rings on every finger, eyes painted so dark they follow him no matter where he shifts. Between them, glass cabinets gleam with imported curios; thin porcelain vases from the Dominions, carved animals from the south, shells prised from far-off coasts.

All of it feels too fine, too bright, against the raw throb in his body. He walks hunched, half-wincing, conscious of how small and crooked he must look limping through a corridor meant for polished boots and lifted chins. His hand brushes the plaster and finds it cold and something solid when the floor itself feels unsteady.

Outside the steward's hall, it's quiet. Too quiet. Only the faint crackle of candlewicks and his own shallow breath. Jonas leans against the wall by the service stair, plaster seeping cool through his skin, and shuts his eyes. He tries to count, slowly and with steady numbers, until the nausea ebbs. The pain is a drum in his hips with every tiny move. Pride lies in tatters, but under those jagged shards, something else has shifted, something nameless yet waiting to be uncovered.

He presses a palm to the welted skin through the fabric, as if touch confirms the world is still his. The sting flares and he hisses softly,

alone with the heat that will not leave him.

When he moves again, he limps past another line of portraits, women painted in hunting leathers, standing proudly beside hounds and horses. They seem to watch him too, but unlike the stern matrons, these ones look as though they're waiting for him to stand taller. The thought is fleeting, chased away by another wave of pain.

By the time Jonas reaches his quarters, the rhythm of the cane has dulled into something slower, deeper. Not gone, never gone, but rooted in his bones now, relentless, waiting to be carried.

Sitting is unthinkable. Going to the bathroom is almost impossible.

He drags himself along the wall until he reaches the servant's corridor.

Once again, no one looks over him twice.

That's the strangest part of all.

No whispers about Branwen. No sly jokes. No muttered sneers. Just… more quiet acknowledgment. Eyes flicking up, then away. Heads dipping in the smallest of nods. Even silence feels different, less of a shunning and more of a recognition. A space opening around him where mockery used to be.

Someone— he hardly recognises the man, save for a memory of a jeering comment weeks ago— murmurs a quick, awkward apology when they pass each other. It is clumsy, stammered out, and over in a blink. But it is still an apology. And that, Jonas realises, is it's own kind of victory.

Even Merrill has vanished from the usual haunts. Once, Jonas glimpses the back of him in the linen hall. Merrill notices, stiffens, and limps the other way without a word.

That helps. A little.

But later, alone in his cot, Jonas realises what it costs. Every movement is fire in his skin. Every attempt to shift feels like it will tear him apart. He curls sideways, unable to lie flat, arms tight around himself. The bruises throb with every heartbeat.

And yet— despite the pain, despite the shame— there is something steady at the centre of him. A spark, quiet but stubborn. He had fought back. He had borne the punishment. And now, for the first time, others look at him differently. Not kindly, not warmly, but with almost a wary respect.

The pain might fade. The welts might heal. But that shift— that small, hard-won shift— will remain.

The lavatory, one of many for servants, is not much. It's little more than a chipped basin, a crooked mirror, and the sour reek of lye soap that clings to the walls. Sometimes, Jonas wonders how the water closets meant for nobles look like. But right now, he braces his palms on the rim of the basin and shifts his weight gingerly, lowering the waistband of his trousers enough to inspect the damage.

The welts cross his skin in brutal lines, livid red and purple, ridged like raised ropes. A few of them are darkening already, swelling into angry knots. One near the edge of his thigh seeps a thin, clear fluid

that stains the cloth he presses against it. The sting is constant, a fire that flares with every breath, every movement.

He straightens by degrees, the mirror catching the tight set of his jaw and the sweat dampening his hairline. He looks pale. Hollow-eyed. But the chores won't wait. They never do. He has already carried buckets this morning, scrubbed pans in slow, careful motions, and shifted crates of carrots one by one to avoid bending too far. Each task feels like a punishment layered over the punishment itself.

A knock rattles the door.

Jonas startles, tugging his trousers up in a rush. The fabric drags across the raw stripes, and he sucks in a sharp breath, his fingers trembling as he fumbles with the belt.

When he opens the door, Branwen is standing in the doorway.

There was something off in her stance, an unsettled kind of tension in her jaw. Her eyes swept over him quickly.

"...I heard you were in a fight," She murmurs, like she is still deciding whether to believe it.

Jonas opens his mouth. Closes it again. He can feel the tightness under his eye and the dull swelling on one side of his lip. Branwen steps inside the small washroom and closes the door behind her with quiet finality. Immediately, his face warms. They feel almost *too* close in too small a space. He steps back to give her room, careful not to wince.

"Didn't believe it. Not you. But—" Her eyes passes over him again,

“Well. I can see I was wrong.”

Jonas nods weakly.

Her brows furrow and her arms folded across her chest in a way that doesn’t look defensive— it looks braced. Jonas looks away. His stomach is crawling. He hates being seen like this by her. He wishes she’d waited a few more days. Weeks. Months. Any time where he doesn’t look so wounded. Jonas had wanted to talk in the kennels triumphantly, to declare he had fought a battle on his own. That he achieved something—

Then she asks, voice low.

“Was it *him?* Merrill?”

He nods again.

She lets out a short breath. Something that sounds like tightly contained *rage*.

Something about that sound, about how she stands with rigid tension — How *angry* she looks, it compels Jonas to blurt out, “I—I thr–threw t-the first… p-punch.”

That seems to knock the wind from her. A half-laugh, startled and rough, suddenly comes out of her, like she can’t decide if she should be scolding him or cheering. It’s quick, but real. *Pride.*

The warmth of it blooms in his chest, cutting through the ache for one dizzying moment.

She steps closer, just a little. Not enough to crowd him, but enough that he feels it.

“You?” She says, utterly disbelieving, “You threw the first hit?”

“I h-h-had e-enough,” Jonas replies, “He—he s-said some t-things.”

“I bet he did. Arsehole has been running his mouth a lot.”

Her lips presses flat. Silence stretches.

Then, her voice quiet again, “It wasn’t just a fight, was it? What did they do to you?”

Jonas hesitates for a moment. He could lie, he supposes. Say he was benched. Told to mop floors for a week. Extra duties. A dressing-down. But her face is too open. Too earnest. Too *worried*.

So he speaks, as plainly as he can.

“T-t-ten.”

She blinks, “What?”

Jonas looks at the floor, “L-l-lashes. Ten.”

“Fuck.”

She sounds stunned. Jonas can’t bear to look up now. He feels the shame creeping in now, bitter and thick.

“M-M-Maud s-said I—I s-should,” He tries explaining uselessly, “S-Should… ha–have kn-known—”

“Jonas.” Her voice cuts through.

He stops. His hands are fidgeting and he forces them still.

“You were caned? Properly?”

He nods.

“On your back?”

He gives a tiny shake of the head.

He hears Branwen step away, pacing in whatever little space the servant’s lavatory provides. He glances up, watching her look at the basin like she wants to kick it across the room.

“You can’t even sit down, huh?”

He shakes his head again. That one is easier to admit.

She mutters something under her breath but doesn’t elaborate. Her jaw is tight, like she is chewing stone. Her brows are furrowed deep with consternation.

“I should’ve known,” She says after a beat, “Should’ve found you sooner. I just— I didn’t think…”

“I w-w-wouldn’t want you t-to,” Jonas suddenly blurts out.

Branwen turns to look at him.

“I m-m-mean—” He swallows, “T-to… see m-me… Not l-like this. N-n-not all b-bruised and…” His voice trails off, “P-pitiful.”

“You’re not pitiful.”

That lands like a clean stitch.

Branwen steps forward again, this time slower, until she stands just in front of him. Her hands twitch at her sides, like she wants to reach for him but didn’t know how.

“I brought ointment, when I heard you were in a fight. Didn’t actually think you might need it. Better stuff. From the kennels. The kind we

use on hocks and split hooves. Hells, I've used it a couple times on myself. Stuff works pretty well, I'll rub it on if you want."

Jonas shifts his weight, awkward and stiff. The motion gives him away immediately. He can't hide the sharp pull of pain when he moves. His shoulders hunch, his fingers curl tight against his trousers. His cheeks flush and he stammers, "B-But… it's… m—my… a..a…"

"Your arse? Yeah, I know."

Her bluntness is nearly enough to make him wheeze. Jonas's throat works, his voice barely a rasp, "I c—c-can…" He doesn't finish. The thought of reaching back there himself makes him wince; he can't twist properly without flaring the pain, can't see well enough to spread the balm evenly. He knows it. She knows it.

"I don't want you walking around hurting worse than you already do. You'll need help to get it on right," She says, softer now, "No point pretending otherwise."

Jonas bites the inside of his cheek. His pulse hammers, not just from embarrassment but from the raw, unfamiliar vulnerability of it, of her knowing and offering. His hands twitch at his sides. He forces himself to look at her properly, just a fraction, enough to see that her expression isn't cruel, isn't mocking. It's steady. Kind, even.

"…it w-wasn't j-just him," He adds quietly, feeling the pull to tell her more, "It's b-b-been everything. Ev-everyone. For weeks. I just—" He swallows, "H-had en—enough."

She doesn't say anything right away. Then—

“You did what you had to.”

He nods. She understands. She’s the only one that understands. Of course she does— It’s Branwen. It feels good to be… Affirmed. It makes a comforting warmth bloom further in his chest. With that, Jonas feels more at ease with her touching him.

“A-al—alright. T-The… Oint… ointment… p-please.”

Branwen nods once, brisk and practical, “Good. Let’s get you sorted.”

Jonas lets out a shaky breath he didn’t realise he was holding, a mixture of dread and relief flooding through him. Awkward as it is, painful as it is, he trusts her enough to step into that moment. And for the first time all day, despite the sting in his skin, he doesn’t feel entirely alone.

He then finds himself gripping the edge of a washstand until his knuckles blanches. Branwen is behind him, quiet enough he can hear the soft pull of the ointment jar’s cork as she opens it.

Face burning, Jonas fiddles with the belt and peels his trousers down just below the welts. It’s agonizing and slow. It feels… more even exposing than when he was caned in front of four people.

And though Branwen is behind him, he was keenly, miserably aware that the front of his groin is left unguarded, nothing but the hang of fabric in front. She couldn’t see anything, not unless she deliberately craned her neck— Which she wouldn’t, he *knows* she wouldn’t— but still.

Still.

No one has ever seen him like this. Not a woman. Certainly not Branwen.

Then comes the first touch.

Cool fingers. Ointment-slicked. Her hand lands high, near the arch of his lower back, just a resting weight at first, steadying herself. Jonas flinches anyway.

“S-s-sorry,” He stammers.

“Don’t be,” She says softly, “I’m going to start now.”

As she continues, the ointment is shocking against the angry heat of his welts. Jonas suppresses a hiss, fingers tightening on the edge of the basin as Branwen works carefully, spreading the balm in slow, steady circles. Her hands are firm but gentle, as though she understands exactly how deep the sting runs.

Her callouses rasp faintly over unbroken skin. But where he was raw, tender and swollen, she lightens her pressure, barely there, like a whisper of contact. It’s a strange contradiction. *Stinging relief.* Comfort that hurts. Jonas’s breath comes shallow.

He could feel her movements clearly. It’s the only thing he can focus on. A soft drag of fingers from spine to outer hip. A cautious dab at the deepest welt. A pause, a breath, and then circling again, as if she isn’t quite sure if he could take more.

Jonas is glad she can't see his face.

Because despite the pain, despite the cool slickness of the ointment and the unholy heat blooming beneath it, the part of him that isn't howling in discomfort is… unraveling.

He burns with embarrassment, every nerve raw at the thought of her seeing him like this, trousers tugged down, bare and battered, bent forward under her hand. A part of him wants to disappear, yet at the same time he can't bring himself to stop her.

She doesn't tease him, doesn't gawk, doesn't flinch. She just works in silence, her touch precise. The ointment spreads cool, then warms, sinking deep into the fire left by the cane. Each stroke eases the rawest edges of pain, even as it leaves him flushed in an entirely different way.

The quiet between them is heavy, but not uncomfortable. *Intimate* in a way he cannot name.

And he thinks. He thinks of what it would be like to stand at her side, to let her voice ground him, to wait for her approval, to completely defer to her wishes— none of it feels humiliating. It feels steady. He catches himself imagining what it would be like if she leaned heavier onto his body, maybe even demanded more of his hours and hands in the stables and kennels. He thinks— he would not mind. He would give it. Gladly.

And because of that some part of him, *despite* the shame and embarrassment, wants this moment to last a little longer. Not the pain. Not the awkwardness. But her.

Her presence. Her care. Her hands on him, not in some fantasy way, but *real*. Actual kindness. A rare thing.

Branwen smooths the last line of ointment over a welt that had begun to ooze, “There, that’s it. You took that better than I would have. Though you’ll need a couple more applications over the next few weeks. Don’t need anything getting infected,” She mutters. Her fingers lift. Jonas feels the shift in air before. He hears her move and when he chances a glance back, he sees that she’s turned around to give him some privacy. It makes his heart skip a beat.

He tugs his trousers back up, movements stiff and jerky. He tucks in air through his teeth, and mutters a sharp, “Ow,” before following it with a soft, “…T-t-thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Just— Don’t go overworking yourself now.”

Neither of them move. The air between them hangs heavy, like neither quite knows what to do with it. Jonas simply stares at her back, then she also turns to face him. His breath hitches when she reaches out— hesitates— then gives his arm a short squeeze. Just once. It’s nothing, really. A fleeting touch. But it’s more touch from her, and this one is openly *affectionate* and more than anyone has given him in a long time, and it nearly undoes him.

“If I could’ve taken half of it for you,” She says gruffly, “I would’ve. Hells, I would have taken all ten for you.”

Jonas nods once. His throat is tight.

So is hers, he thinks.

Then she turns and leaves, boots echoing against the floorboards.

He stays where he is, staring at the warped mirror, at the ghost of himself reflected there. The scent of ointment clings faintly in the air, sharp and medicinal. His skin still burns, his body still aches, but beneath all that is something else, something steadier and stranger.

The touch of her hand lingers on his arm… and his rear… warm in a way that spreads further than it should. He feels hollowed out and filled at once, aching not just from the cane but from the weight of wanting— wanting *what,* he cannot even name.

He braces both hands on the basin, shuts his eyes, and breathes until the silence presses too close. Then, slowly, carefully, he straightens and forces himself back to his chores.

But early the next morning, before the next set of chores… A cake to be made.

The scent of horses and straw and pine salve clings to Branwen's sleeves as she leans against the stall door, arms folded tight, staring at nothing. The ointment tin is still in her pocket. She hadn't meant to keep it. She should've left it with him.

Should've—

"What the *hells* was that, Marshal?"

Her brow twitches.

Maud stands in the stable's wide entrance, wrapped in her night shawl and wearing her stormiest scowl, eyes narrowed beneath the flicker of the overhead lantern. Her arms are crossed too, but not in the way that means cold. This is the lecture stance.

Branwen's jaw works before her voice does, "What was what?"

Maud stalks in, boots clicking hard on the stone floor. "You tending his welts like some hearthbound nursemaid. And don't try pretending you weren't. The other lads said they saw you head into a water closet while he was still inside, holding a tin of ointment."

Branwen scowls, "I assume you're well aware that he's hurt."

"So are a dozen others who've never seen the inside of your little medicine kit."

"That's not—"

"You *rubbed ointment on his arse,* Branwen."

That shuts her up.

Heat rises hot behind her ears. She drops her gaze but her voice is low and annoyed, "It wasn't like that."

“Oh no?” Maud stops just in front of her, arms still tight, “Because to everyone else, it looks exactly like that. It looks like fraternizing. Has looked like that for a while. You know, something we aren't supposed to do. One of those rules we’re all expected to follow?”

Branwen’s mouth goes dry. She pushes off the stall, straightening to her full height, “I don’t fraternize.”

Maud arches a brow, “Don’t you?”

“No!” The word cracks sharp, louder than she means. She reins her voice down, steady but hard, anger flickering her expression, “We just… talk. Sometimes. And he’s often on kennel or stable duty, and that’s *your* doing with the chore chart, not mine.”

Maud gives a little scoff, as though that proves the point.

Branwen’s temper spikes hot, “If your servants didn’t give him so much grief, he’d never have to fight for himself like that. What the fuck were you doing while they made him a target? While they pushed him to fists?”

The other woman stiffens, colour rising to her cheeks. Not that she has any leg to stand on— Branwen hadn’t protected him either. She never would have imagined he’d throw a punch, never thought he had it in him. But even so, anger burns white hot in her, because Jonas shouldn’t *need* someone to protect him. Not from this. Not from his own fucking peers. All this, over a stutter. A stammer. Breath catching on consonants. Something so small and insignificant and *human.* She’s fucking over it.

“You’re head of housestaff, Maud,” Branwen presses, fury threading every syllable now, “That’s your responsibility. If you’d done your

bloody job, he wouldn't have welts to tend in the fucking first place!"

Her words hang in the air like sparks after a hammer strike, the silence between them sharp enough to cut. Branwen doesn't even realize she's shaking until she feels it in her jaw. Rage, guilt, the bitter taste of helplessness; it all blurs together until she can hardly tell which one is eating her alive. Her hands flex like they want to seize something, break something, anything to match the blaze in her chest. Maud just stares, lips pressed thin, as if weighing whether to strike back or leave it.

And for a flicker of a moment, Branwen doesn't care what comes next. All she knows is this: She will no longer stand by and let them break Jonas for something that has never deserved punishment.

Maud's mouth pulls thin, her jaw set tight, "This isn't about me. This is about you being too sweet on a servant boy."

The words hit like a thrown stone. *Sweet on.* Branwen's shoulders knot, though she forces her face flat and unreadable. She will not give Maud the satisfaction of seeing her flinch like that.

Instead she places her hands on her hips, nails digging hard into her trousers, "Believe what you want. But don't stand in my stables and tell me to ignore blood when I see it."

Maud's nostrils flare. Her tone comes out flat, "Careful, Marshal. Sweeten yourself too much on that boy, and everyone will see exactly where your loyalties lie. And they won't be with this household."

She turns on her heel, shawl swinging, and strides back toward the lantern glow of the stable doors.

Branwen stays rooted, jaw tight, breath sharp in her nose. The smell of horses and pine salve sits heavy in her throat. She presses her palms against the stall rail, willing her pulse to settle, but it only hammers harder.

Loyalties. The word gnaws at her. She's once again reminded that she has no last name. That mark of trust, of permanence, of place within the estate. Others from the Freeholds have earned theirs over the years… Namely Maud herself. *Barlowe* was the name The Lady gave her years ago. Branwen was present for that ceremony, when Maud was brought into the fold proper and granted a name that says she, a dirty Freeholder, was no longer an outsider.

Branwen has waited. Hoped. Told herself her work is enough, that one day she will be more than the girl from a drowned village.

But standing here, Maud's words still stinging in her ears, Branwen feels the truth settle heavy in her gut. She is useful. She is liked. She is comfortable here, has been for years. But she is not truly *theirs.*

Her place is only as secure as her usefulness.

The thought burns more than the anger.

She scrubs a hand over her face, breath catching in her chest. Maud thinks she sees a woman sweet on a boy. What Branwen sees is a boy who deserves more than ridicule and blood, who deserves a chance to live without the weight of his every syllable used against him. If that is sweetness, then fine. Let them call it that. She will not look away.

Still, the echo of Maud's warning digs in, sharp as a burr under the

skin: *“They won’t be with this household.”*

Her hands curl tighter on the stall rail until the wood creaks. For the first time in years, Branwen wonders... Not where her loyalties lie, but whether this place would ever return the same loyalty to her.

The ointment tin digs into her pocket, a quiet weight.

The yard is still half-asleep when Branwen stumbles out of her narrow chamber. The sky above the estate hangs low and colourless, the first scraps of dawn barely breaking over the ridgeline. A damp chill clings to the air, heavy with the smell of wet earth and smoke from last night’s banked hearths.

She yawns wide enough to crack her jaw, dragging her coat over her nightshirt without bothering with the buttons. Her boots scuff against the cobbles as she crosses into the stable, muttering under her breath, “Gods, it’s too bloody early.”

The big doors groan when she shoves them open. Inside, the stalls are quiet, horses still shifting in their sleep, the air thick with straw and the faint, sweet reek of oats.

She blinks against the dim, early light bleeding in through the threshold. Someone’s there— Waiting just outside.

At first, she thinks it’s one of the stablehands, some eager hand hoping to earn favour by mucking in before sun-up. She grunts, “It’s not even dawn yet. You’ll catch your death out here.”

But then her eyes adjust.

And it's not a stablehand.

It's Jonas.

It takes her a heartbeat to believe what she's seeing.

Jonas stands there in the grey spill of dawn, pale as milk, stiff as carved wood. His shoulders are hunched, every muscle tight, his face drawn into something that looks half-pained, half-determined. He looks worse than yesterday— like every step that brought him here had to be fought for. His hands tremble, one clutched around something bundled in cloth.

Her stomach drops, "Gods, Jonas— what in the hells are you doing out here? Are you even on kennel duty today? Why are you so early?"

He opens his mouth, but she doesn't let him get a word out. She grabs his arm and pulls him inside, quick and urgent, shutting the stable doors behind them before anyone else can see. "You should be in bed. You're not even close to healed. Fuck, Jonas, I need to tell Maud to lay off on the chores too."

He winces as he moves, and the sound that slips from him makes her grit her teeth. Ten lashes, across the rear, she'd seen the welts herself only last night, rubbed ointment into them while he shook under her hands. And now he's gone and walked half the estate before dawn, like some stubborn fool.

“What were you thinking?” She hisses, steering him toward the tack bench by the stalls. Not that he’d be able to fucking *sit* on anything, “Do you want the skin torn raw again? Do you want fever on top of it?”

Only then does she really look at the bundle he’s holding. The cloth is from the kitchens, tied neat around a small shape. She blinks, confusion cutting through her anger and worry. She catches a whiff of it, something with cinnamon and honey.

“…Is that a cake?”

“I—um—I b-b-baked it,” Jonas says, voice halting, but there’s no mistaking the wide, tired smile spreading across his face. His eyes, though rimmed with shadows and pain, shine with something bright. It’s hopeful, almost defiant. He’s still trembling from the walk, she can see it in the way his knees lock and shoulders hitch, but the pride in him is stubborn and unshaken.

She stares at the bundle in his hands, hardly believing her own eyes. A cake. Of all things.

Jonas shifts his weight. The movement draws a sharp hiss through his teeth, his body tensing as if a lash has landed fresh across his back. She winces for him, but he steadies, gripping the cloth-wrapped bundle tighter.

“Th-third a-a-attempt,” He says softly.

Branwen frowns, “…Third?”

His nod is small but sure, “F-Fenn t-took the first. Said I—I’d st-stolen pantry sugar. I ha–hadn’t.”

“He what—?” Heat flares in her chest and despite not fully understanding anything that’s happening, Branwen has homicide on her mind. His quiet but steady voice breaks her out of thoughts of murder. Each word carries weight that makes her pause.

“S-second attempt… N-N-Nobleman sa—saw it, th-thought I was… e-entering He–H-Hearthurn. T-took it to the h-hall.”

Branwen stares at him, at this pale, limping fool who has dragged himself through dawnlight agony just to hand her a small, humble cake. She knows now— knows with a sudden, bone-deep clarity— that this isn’t some trifling gesture. Jonas explains more fully and the picture becomes clearer. This isn’t just flour and sugar. He tried three times. Tried even when accused. Tried even when his work was stolen. Tried even while welted and bruised from the cane.

A quiet, relentless effort. For— For what? For *her?*

Her throat tightens. “Y-You couldn’t wait? You’re hurt. You should have healed a little bit first.”

Jonas shifts the bundle toward her, careful, like he’s carrying something more fragile than cake.

“I—I c-couldn’t wait. I w-wanted to… g-get you something. As… th-thanks. For e-everything y-you’ve done for me.”

The words lodge like an arrow. Branwen’s whole body goes still, as if

he's struck her without meaning to. Earnestness radiates off him, all unguarded and unpolished and painfully sincere. He is bruised, welted, limping from every step, and still, he's smiling at her like this cake is a triumph. Like giving it to her is a victory worth every lash.

And she is wholly unprepared. She feels— utterly unworthy.

Maud's sharp voice gnaws in the back of her mind, the reminder not to fraternize, not to grow soft over some lowly servant boy. She tells herself she shouldn't. She shouldn't indulge this. She shouldn't take what he's offering.

But then she looks at him. Really looks. At the swell of pride in his face despite the pain, at those big, earnest eyes shining with the hope that she'll accept it. At how happy he looks, just holding it out to her.

Her chest caves.

Slowly, she reaches out and takes the cake from his hands.

His shoulders sag in quiet relief, a breath spilling from him like he's been holding it for hours.

The weight of the bundle settles in her palms, warm through the cloth. And all she can think is— gods fucking help her— *how could I ever say no to that face?*

She unwraps it and breaks off a corner of the cake and brings it to her mouth. The moment her tongue tastes it, her brows lift in surprise. Branwen chews slowly, savouring the crackle of honeyed crust, the soft interior spiced with clove and cinnamon. A hint of ginger, just

enough to bite. Not too sweet.

It is… thoughtful. Measured.

Perfect.

She swallows, working hard to keep her face neutral, “It’s good,” she says, tone even, as if that might disguise how much it moves her, “I… I like it.”

Jonas’s whole face lights up, tired as he is. The swell of pride in him is so unguarded it nearly undoes her. She tears off another piece and holds it out toward him, “Here.”

He shakes his head quickly, stammering, “N-no. It’s… it’s y-yours.”

She huffs, meaning to roll her eyes, to make light of it, but then he adds, almost too shyly—

“It’s… a b-birthday ca–c-cake too.”

The words land like a blow straight to her ribs.

For a moment, she can’t breathe.

She blinks at him, at the tilt of his head, at the way he looks both proud and terrified of what he’s just admitted. The meaning curls through her like smoke: he *remembered*. He remembered the silly, off-

hand thing she'd said about constellations and tempers and stars in the *Standard* not concerning itself with women— It is her birthday season. And he made *this*.

It is too much. Too generous. Too *soft*.

She clears her throat, trying to claw back some ground, "Birthday cake, is it? That's rich. I haven't celebrated my birthday in years. Sometimes I bloody forget it even exists."

Jonas blinks, startled, then he presses his lips together as he seemingly waits for her to continue. Fuck. Godsdammit. *Those eyes.*

The silence gnaws at her until she sighs, "Fine. It's in July. Sixteenth. Which—" She gestures at the cake with a sharp little flick of her fingers— "Doesn't mean you were right to go hobbling halfway across the estate when your arse is still welted."

But the sharpness falters. Because she can *see* it. The way he goes still, the way his mouth parts slightly, the way his eyes soften as he repeats the number in his head. *Sixteenth. Sixteenth.* He's pinning it somewhere deep, like it actually matters.

Her chest tightens again. Too much. Always too much with him.

So she snaps, trying to sound gruff but failing miserably to her ears, "Well? Out with it. When's yours?"

His eyes widen, "M-m-mine? Oh. Uh. S-s-september. Tw-twenty-eight."

Branwen watches him fidget, watches the flicker of embarrassment in his face, but she also sees the weight of the truth. He's giving her the same thing she gave him. Trust. She exhales through her nose, rough and short, "September twenty-eight," She mutters, as if just saying it will lock it in place.

Jonas's lips twitch. He knows she's committing it, too. Knows, and still somehow looks astonished by it.

Too much. It's all too much. And yet, against every bit of sense she owns, Branwen knows she's not forgetting that date. Not if she tried.

"Anyway… You think I'm eating this whole thing in front of you? Like a sow at a trough? Not happening. Have some. Birthday cake is meant to be shared, anyway."

Her voice is a poor disguise for the way her heart is twisting, but it's all she has.

Jonas only smiles wider.

She nudges the piece of cake toward him again, and after a moment, he takes it carefully between his fingers. Those same long, deft fingers she'd seen fold linens with almost ceremonial precision. His hand brushes hers in the exchange.

A current goes through her at the touch.

He brings the piece to his lips, eyes now mostly downcast, but she

catches the faintest glance upward as he eats it.

There is a stillness in the stable. A hush. The kind of quiet that makes her feel like she has stepped outside time. They eat in silence, passing small, warm bits back and forth between their hands, fingers grazing, then lingering just a second too long. She pretends not to notice. Or rather, she lets herself pretend for the sake of not completely falling apart.

Jonas eventually leans awkwardly against one of the posts, stiff and sore and clearly doing everything he can not to wince. Branwen tries not to picture the welts again, doesn't let herself remember the hot flush of shame she feels while applying ointment, the way his breath hitches from the pain. But he stands here now, quiet and battered, and yet more himself than she has ever seen him.

Every so often, he looks up. Just a flick of the eyes. Always shy, always brief, but real. Like he wants to see her. Like it matters.

She tries to keep it casual, this thing— This shared bite of cake, this quiet morning, this unbearable feeling in her chest like something is going to break open.

Because something deep in her chest has shifted. Or cracked.

Or softened beyond repair.

Chapter End Notes

Jonas last chapter: Uwah... Stubborn doesn't really fit me.
Also Jonas: Bakes a cake and walks half across the estate while in great pain because this cake gotta get to its intended destination, dammit.

Anyway, he did it guys! Pls praise him.

Also these recent chapters have been very Jonas focus (obviously) so I'll be sure to add some more Bran POV wink wonk.

Chapter 10: Interlude: Inches Closer

Chapter Summary

A collection of moments neither of them spoke of after.

Chapter Notes

I wasn't sure if this was gonna be another "interlude" chapter but I found myself writing a series of semi-unrelated vignettes and I figured they worked best set up like this. Also this way I feel like I have an excuse to not necessarily reference these scenes later cause, like, they don't speak about these moments. One time things. Consider this something of a palette cleanser before we get back to the rest of the plot.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

1. The Ointment

Branwen spots him across the courtyard, lugging a basket of chopped kindling toward the scullery door. Summer light lays pale across the flagstones, catching in the cracks where weeds push through. It's warm but never sweltering here in the Eastern Dominion, the kind of weather where the air smells faintly of damp earth and clipped grass, the sky rinsed clean after dawn mist. The main house's walls rise high around the courtyard, ivy crawling up the stone faces, windowpanes open to let in the breeze. From above drifts the clink of crockery and the flutter of linens being beaten at the sill, while below, the courtyard stirs with quiet industry: A kitchen boy crossing with a jug of buttermilk, a stablehand leading a reluctant pony through the side arch.

Jonas's figure moves carefully among it all, basket braced tight to his hip, shoulders bent as though he wants to fold in on himself. His gait is stiff, too stiff, and it takes Branwen only a second to notice the way his weight favours his right leg. Every step lands cautious and measured, like he's trying not to draw notice to the hurt still burning across his rear and thighs.

It makes her jaw clench.

She strides over, boots striking sharp against the flagstones. He notices her only when she's nearly at his side, his shoulders jumping slightly, as though caught out in some mischief.

"You're favouring your right side," She says bluntly.

He stammers, "I—I'm n-not—" but the words die when her look flattens him. His ears flush.

Branwen narrows her eyes, then softens just a fraction, "You shouldn't be hauling wood yet. Not like that."

She watches his throat bob as he swallows, then he mutters something about the chores not doing themselves. His voice is thin, tired, but stubborn as a mule. Indignation immediately flares up inside her, but she knows he can't actually just… *chill out.* Branwen can't tell Maud to lay off on chores and let him rest despite how much she wants to do just that— this whole shiteshow happened because servants got their knickers in a twist about supposed favouritism. He has to stick it out, just like everyone else who has ever been caned before him.

She exhales through her nose, fighting down her temper. If she tears into him, he'll only retreat further into that damned silence of his. She tells herself it isn't softness. It's just practicality, a handler's instinct for when to use the crop and when to hold the reins loose. But the truth needles under her ribs. She's gone soft for this boy, and there's no walking it back. No horse or soul on this estate has ever tugged her temper and patience in equal measure the way he does.

So instead she leans a little closer, lowering her voice to something steady and quiet, “If you ever need more ointment, you’ll know where to find me.”

Jonas’s mouth opens as if to argue, but no words come. He only nods, slow and awkward, clutching the basket tighter like it might anchor him.

Branwen straightens, crossing her arms, “Good. Don’t be stupid about it.”

The words come out clipped and sharp. Her chest aches with the urge to say more, something almost kind, and she strangles it before it can form.

Then she turns on her heel, leaving him standing there with the faintest, shyest spark in his eyes, like her words meant more than she intended them to. And damn it all, she feels that same spark settle in her own chest, whether she wants it there or not.

And sure enough, he comes to her as the day goes on and chores are finished.

The sun is setting, lanterns guttering low in the stable aisle, when Jonas appears in the doorway. Branwen is rubbing down a mare, half-lulled by the rhythm of the brush, until she hears the hesitant scuff of his boots on stone. She glances up. He somehow looks *smaller* than usual, shoulders drawn in, hands worrying at the hem of his shirt.

Her first thought is: *trouble.* But then she sees it in his eyes. Not trouble. *Need.*

“C-can I…” He starts, voice rough, stumbling over the words, “…have m-more of the… the o-ointment? I-It… hurts…”

The brush stills in her hand. For a beat, all she hears is the horse shifting in the stall and the faint creak of leather tack. Then she sets the brush down and straightens so fast she hears her godsdamn spine crack.

“Of course,” She says quickly. *Too* quickly. She swipes her palms on her trousers, already moving to herd him toward the tack room, away from potential wandering eyes. He follows, hesitant steps echoing against the stone floor.

The little room is cramped, smelling of oil and hay, but it’s private. She shuts the door and reaches for the small tin on the shelf, the same one she carried in her pocket when she first applied it onto him. Her pulse is a little too loud in her ears.

Jonas stands stiff near the wall, not meeting her gaze. He fumbles at his belt, cheeks red, the air taut between them. Branwen clears her throat, “Go on. I’ll… I’ll be quick.”

He nods awkwardly, as though even the nod hurts now.

She was careful the first time, but now she takes even greater care and effort for him. The gentleness feels heavier. He trusts her enough to ask. To come here. To bare himself again, in all his awkward shame, and let her help. Branwen realises how difficult and emotionally exhausting it must be for him to even be here.

Her fingers move slow, deliberate, smoothing ointment over the angry stripes. The salve shines faintly under the lamplight, and his skin is hot beneath her touch— *too hot, too alive.* She tells herself she’s only

tending wounds, nothing more, yet she can't shake the awareness that she is touching him. On the arse. Not just any man, but Jonas, bent forward in quiet submission, letting her tend the rawest, most painful parts of him.

Each time his breath hitches, the sound lodges under her ribs. She keeps her face blank, but her pulse is betraying her, quick and uneven, as if her body knows something she refuses to name. The work is simple and mechanical, but every stroke makes the silence heavier, stretching taut between them until she almost fears it will snap.

When she's done, she caps the tin and steps back. For a moment she doesn't know what to do with her hands, whether to fold them, or rub away the memory of his heat still clinging to her fingers. She clears her throat, brusque to cover the quiet twisting in her gut, "That should hold you a while."

Jonas pulls his trousers back up with careful hands. He doesn't look at her, not directly, but his head dips. A ragged breath escapes him, and then, barely audible, "Th-thank you." The words land clumsy and soft, but they knock something loose in her chest all the same, "I-I-I… d-didn't wa–want to… b-b-bother…"

Branwen snorts, heart beating fast in a way she doesn't know how to deal with, *"Bother?* Jonas, if you need it, you ask. That's all."

He finally risks a glance at her, quick and sidelong, then drops his eyes to the floorboards as though even that much exposure is too much. The silence stretches again, thick as the salve still cooling on his skin. His shoulders then ease a fraction and Jonas nods, and though his eyes stay lowered, there's relief there. Maybe even gratitude deeper than words.

Branwen draws in a slow breath through her nose, willing her voice to

stay even, “You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of. Not with me.” But in her mind, his thank you still lingers, low and warm in her chest, like a coal she can’t stamp out.

Jonas’s hands tighten on the hem of his tunic, his throat bobbing once before he nods again, slow and silent.

It becomes a rhythm over the next several nights. He comes to her—never with fanfare, always shy, always careful— as though asking too loudly might break the fragile truce between his tattered pride and her willingness. And every time, she sets aside whatever she’s doing. Every time, she makes sure they find some corner away from others.

And each time, the silence between them stretches less like a gulf, more like a tether. Something drawing them inches closer, whether either of them admits it or not.

2. The Letter

The letter feels heavier than paper should.

Jonas knows his brother’s handwriting before he even breaks the wax. The sharp, hurried strokes, as though Eliam is forever trying to keep ahead of his own thoughts. He unfolds the page, skims once, then again slower, his eyes catching on phrases that sink like stones.

Lina says I’ve been neglecting the cooking again, distracted with my work…

You can't go on like this forever, Jonas…

I've made inquiries. There's a physician near the coast, claims to have a method for stammering boys…

Lina's cousin is still unmarried. She's kind, practical. You'd have a good life with her, better than wasting it in service…

Jonas folds the letter once, twice, the creases sharp beneath his fingers. He sets it aside on the table as though distance might dull the sting. His jaw tightens despite him willing it not to.

"Bad news?"

Branwen's voice is as rough as gravel and cuts through the quiet. She's leaned against the stall frame, arms crossed, studying him with that too-keen look she gets when she knows he's chewing on something.

Jonas shrugs too quickly.

"Your brother again?"

Another shrug. It's not like it's ever anyone else who writes him. His fingers twitch toward the letter before he tucks them in his lap instead.

Branwen tilts her head, "He's got opinions enough to fill a cart, that

one.”

Jonas lets out the faintest huff. It could almost be a laugh, he’s not sure how it hears to his own ears.

“You ever think of writing back something sharp? Tell him to keep his nose out of your business?” She smirks faintly, “Not too sharp. Just enough he knows you mean it.”

Jonas’s shoulders rise, then fall. The thought alone makes his stomach knot. To snap at Eliam— even gently— feels impossible. Eliam means well. And Jonas knows he shouldn’t be angry at his family… Not really… They have done and continue to do what’s best for him…

His mouth works soundlessly, then shuts again. He shakes his head.

Her gaze softens a fraction, though her tone stays steady. “Well. If you ever need to say aloud what’s weighing on you, I’ll listen. Doesn’t have to be family. Could be anything.”

Something inside him shifts at that. She says it so matter-of-factly, but it feels like she’s given him something precious.

Jonas nods quickly, before his throat can betray him. And though he doesn’t speak, he holds on to her words like a promise.

3. The Book

She finds him in the stable loft during a lull in chores, half-hunched beside a tack trunk with his knees pulled up, the latest issue of *The Genteel Standard* open in his lap. Jonas's lips move silently as his eyes trace the cramped, silly columns about seasonal curtain trends and polite riddles for parlour games.

The loft isn't a place Branwen goes often. It's too cramped, too dusty, mostly left for stablehands to nap off hangovers or dice away free minutes. The air is warm and close, thick with hay-dust that turns the sunbeams sharp and golden where they slant through the slats. The smell is a muddle of leather oil, horse sweat, and the faint sour tang of grain left too long in its sacks. Harness racks line one wall, their contents orderly enough only because she insists on it, and the old blanket in the corner still bears the imprint of someone's boots.

Jonas doesn't *actually* belong up here, his chores wouldn't bring him in the loft, but he looks… settled. Small against the tack trunk, bent over his paper like he's reading scripture. The *Standard* trembles faintly in his hands, the sound of turning pages soft against the muffled clop of hooves below.

It makes her pause, because she hadn't thought to claim this loft for herself, but seeing that he has carved out a quiet hollow here, she feels a sudden, strange pull to it.

…She ignores it and instead focuses on the *Standard.*

Branwen snorts under her breath. That shite again. Not that he has much options. It's all the house allows the servant boys, after all. Though she *has* caught him reading the manuals in the tack room every now and then. Clearly, he might want to read something else on occasion.

The thought gnaws at her all through the evening. By the time her shift ends, she's had enough. She marches straight into the main house, boots clicking against polished stone, hair still smelling of hay and horse. Past the many parlours, down the wide hall with its glittering chandeliers, until she stands before the carved double doors of The Lady's library.

The door is ajar. She pushes in.

Rows upon rows of spines greet her, smelling of leather and dust and polish. A junior maid looks up from dusting a side table, eyes wide, "Excuse me, you're not—"

Branwen cuts her a glare sharp enough to skin a hide. The girl closes her mouth with an audible click and scurries back to her rag.

Branwen moves down the shelves, scanning gilt titles. She ignores the books with worldly titles that make her feel small. Some books are all marked in neat inked script: *HUSBAND SAFE.* Little slips tucked into the spines. No war chronicles, no political theory, no bloodshed or discord. Titles with words like *Peaceful Meadows* or *The Pleasant Travels of Lady Fenton.* These are the books meant for noble husbands. Safe stories for safe men.

Branwen runs her fingers along the spines. Most are fluff, but tucked between them are a few older volumes. *Villages of the Eastern Dominions: Customs and Craft* catches her eyes for a moment. It details sewing and embroidery and all that delicate stuff, but also superstitions and rituals in villages she assumes Jonas has never visited. A relic, most likely meant for display more than reading. She pulls it free, dust puffing into the air, and tucks it under her arm.

When she sees him again the next morning, she practically drops into his hands.

He blinks. Stares at the book. Then at her.

“Yes, it’s a book. You can read it.”

Clearly, he realizes this must be something from The Lady’s library as his voice catches, “I—I-I’m… not… I’m not a-a-allowed…”

“You’ll be fine. I’m the one who took it. I’ll be the one to put it back when you’re done. No one’ll string you up for reading about fancy needlework and rites.”

His hand hesitates, then finally goes over the cover. His fingers trace the worn lettering as though it’s gilded. His throat works once, twice, before words emerge, “…Th-thank you. M-Miss B-Branwen, I—”

She shrugs like it’s nothing, though the way he’s looking at her— like she’s just handed him a crown— makes her ears burn, “You’re welcome. Besides, this is better than rotting your brain with the *Standard.”*

He nods quickly, clutching the book tight to his chest with complete reverence. And for the first time, Branwen wonders if anyone has ever given him something that was entirely his, without condition. The thought sits strangely warm in her ribs as she turns away, pretending to busy herself with tack.

Later, when Branwen returns from the yard with a lantern swinging low in her hand, the kennels are quiet. The only sound is the soft rustle of straw beneath her boots. She doesn't actually expect to see Jonas still inside— But when she takes a peek at the loft she sees him.

Jonas is hunched beneath one of the wall lanterns, its dim glow catching the line of his cheekbone, his lashes shadowing low. The book she gave him is spread open across his knees. His lips move faintly, silently shaping the words. He doesn't notice her. Not at first. He's too far gone into it, brow drawn in thought and eyes flicking quick over the page as though he's afraid the words might vanish if he doesn't drink them fast enough. His fingers rest against the edges, obviously careful not to crease anything.

Branwen stops in her tracks. The sight catches her sharp. It's so simple, so small… and yet. *Fuck.* It's like when she gave him those godsdamned shortbread biscuits, except increased tenfold. Like she's carved out a sliver of the world just for him.

She swallows, her throat tight.

Jonas finally glances at her. His eyes widen briefly in surprise, then soften, and he tucks a folded scrap of cloth between the pages as a marker, "S-s-sorry," He murmurs, "...I-It's la–late…"

Branwen shakes her head and she coughs in her hand, her voice is little more than a grunt, "Feel free to stay as long as you'd like. You look… you look like you belong up there. I see the loft is a good place to hang out."

His eyes widen. Then, slowly, the corners of his mouth tilt up.

And Branwen has to look away, busying herself with the lantern hook, because if she stares too long at the glow in his eyes, she might forget herself completely.

4. The Weather

The rain begins in the late afternoon, steady but not fierce. A curtain of silver threads slanting from the eaves, striking puddles with rhythmic patters. Jonas glances up from his work in the scullery, rag still clutched in his hand. It isn't thunder, not yet. No lightning to split the sky. But still, his chest tightens.

Branwen.

He wipes his damp hands against his trousers, ignoring the small scold from another servant as he slips past. He isn't meant for stables today, nor the kennels. But his feet are already carrying him that way, quickened by memory— Her figure motionless in the downpour, water streaming down her face as though she hadn't noticed, her lips moving with words that were not for him but for ghosts. He had coaxed her inside then, gentled her along with all the courage he could muster until a whistle nearly did him in.

He doesn't want to see her like that again.

So he rushes down. The stables and kennels smell of hay and leather, the musk of damp earth carried in by the open doors. At first, he thinks she isn't here. Then he spots her, sitting on a low stool near a side entryway. Her elbows are braced on her knees as she watches the rain fall just beyond the threshold. Jonas remembers scraps of sayings, half-whispered in his childhood: *Rain washes footprints from the road, rain hides omens in its veil, rain softens the earth for things to sink unseen.*

His steps slow. She doesn't look lost, not like before. No mumbling, no vacant stare. Just… watching.

Jonas lingers a few paces back, not wanting to startle her. Still, his presence must carry somehow, because she turns her head slightly, one brow arching as though she's known he was there all along.

"Y-you're…" He clears his throat., "You're… a-alright?"

Her expression shifts at once, it becomes something softer, though tinged with a weight. She huffs a little, though it's not quite a laugh, "Storms catch me. Rain on its own doesn't bite."

His shoulders loosen, but only slightly. Rain doesn't bite, she says. Yet he can't help but think of more old words: *Rain softens the ground for graves. Rain clears the tracks of those led away. Rain hides weeping so the neighbours won't know.*

He nods awkwardly, unsure if he ought to retreat or stay.

She answers for him, "Sit, if you want."

It's not quite an invitation, but it's not a dismissal either. Jonas

swallows and edges closer, lowering himself gingerly onto an overturned bucket a little ways from her stool. It no longer stings to do so. The rain drums steady on the roof above, trickles down from the eaves in fat droplets.

They sit like that for a while.

After a time, Branwen says, "You came looking for me."

Jonas stiffens, heat creeping up his neck. He doesn't deny it, but his voice comes out stammered and thin, "I—I th-thought… j-just in case…"

She turns then, looking at him fully. A morose smile curves her mouth, "You thought I'd be standing out there again, like a fool. Didn't you?"

Jonas thinks of protesting, his fingers tightening around the edge of the bucket. Instead, he nods.

"Y-You're… no—n-not a… fool…" He adds quietly.

Her smile deepens, but it isn't mocking. If anything, it feels… grateful. Though she doesn't say it aloud. She just shakes her head a little, turning back to the rain, "Not today. Just rain today."

The silence stretches again, softer now. He studies the way droplets

race each other down the wood beams, the sheen of wet earth just beyond the doors. He remembers another saying, one among many—*Rain carries whispers from the dead.* He glances at her sidelong, wondering if she hears them when she looks too long.

Then Branwen speaks again, her tone laced with faint humour, “You know, you worry too much.”

“I—I d-don’t…”

“Yes, you do,” Her voice is dry, “Anyone else would’ve been glad for an excuse to stay in the dry and let me be. But not you. You don’t have stable or kennel duty today but you come in anyway, just to check I haven’t drowned in a puddle.”

He makes a strangled sound, halfway between protest and embarrassment.

This earns him a short chuckle. She leans back slightly, eyes narrowing with playful scrutiny, “What am I going to do with you?”

Jonas doesn’t have an answer. His mouth works, but only a broken syllable escapes before he looks down, fixing his gaze on his hands. His pulse hammers in his ears.

Branwen lets a slow, amused whistle. But she doesn’t press further. Instead, she sits forward again, resting her chin in her palm as she watches the rain, “It’s not a bad thing, you know. Having someone worry.”

Jonas dares a glance at her. Her profile is strong against the grey light

filtering in, the faintest hint of a smile tugging her lips. Not the morose one from earlier, but something softer. His throat closes tight around the words he doesn't dare say. That he doesn't mind worrying for her. That he would do it a hundred times more.

So he only nods, small and almost imperceptible.

They stay like that until the rain eases, the patter thinning to a whisper. And when Branwen finally pushes to her feet, she claps a hand to his shoulder as she passes, steady and solid. It nearly knocks him off the bucket.

"Come on," She says gruffly, though her tone holds a thread of warmth, "Let's see if the sky's done sulking."

The touch lingers even after she's gone a few steps ahead.

5. The Lantern

The evening is quiet, the stables softened with the sound of animals shifting in their stalls. A horse blows through its nose, another stomps once, then settles. Outside, the last light fades from indigo into black, and moths brush faintly against the shutters, drawn to the glow that spills from the loft window. Somewhere down the row, a stablehand mutters a drowsy goodnight before the door thuds closed behind her, leaving only Branwen and Jonas, the horses and hounds, and the hush of straw.

She reaches for the lantern on its hook. She means only to move it closer, but her fingers slip on the handle slick with oil. It tilts, wobbles, and before she can right it, the lantern clatters to the floor. The glass shatters in a neat, terrible ring around her boots.

“Damn it,” She mutters under her breath.

From across the aisle, Jonas startles at the sound. He’s been folding tack-cloths, his head bowed in that usual way of his. He drops them at once, as if summoned by duty, and steps over with his usual careful gait that has mostly healed from the caning. His eyes dart to the broken lantern, then to her face. There’s something in the way his brow knits, like he’s already planning how to fix the mess.

“I’ll t-take ca–c–care of it,” he says, soft but firm as he crouches down, almost like he’s telling her she ought not.

“Jonas. I dropped it. I’ll clean it up.”

He shakes his head quickly, already reaching for the shards with deft fingers, “N-no, I—”

Branwen’s mouth curves before she can stop it, the words slipping out low and edged with a smile, “I said I’ll do it. Don’t make me order you.”

The effect is immediate and— startling.

Jonas freezes, his body going utterly still, the shard of glass trembling between his fingers. His breath catches so sharply she thinks he’s cut himself. His head jerks up, eyes wide and pupils dark, lips parted like

she's just struck him with something heavier than words.

For a beat, she thinks he might actually faint.

The teasing smirk falters, "Uh, Jonas?"

He swallows hard, colour rushing hot up his neck and into his ears, "I—I—n-no, you don't—" His voice tangles on itself. He drops the glass into the pail with a clatter and sits back on his heels, as if retreating.

Branwen straightens a little, "I was joking. You all right?"

He shakes his head too fast, then nods, then can't seem to decide. His hands flutter once, then knot together tightly in his lap. His whole face is flushed, eyes down and lashes trembling like he can't bear to look at her.

Branwen tilts her head in complete bafflement. He looks… undone. Over one stupid tease.

"I—" Jonas squeaks out, "I d-didn't—mean to—" He presses his lips together, trying to rein himself in, but it only makes the red in his cheeks deepen.

She watches him carefully, something twisting in her chest. It's mostly confusion laced with that same, reluctant softness which… Really, is far less reluctant than it used to be, much to her continued dismay.

"Relax," She says finally, gentler now, "I wasn't serious. I only order

the stablehands around."

He nods quickly, but he's still a mess of nerves. His chest rises too fast, eyes darting everywhere but her. It unsettles her enough that she almost regrets teasing him at all… Almost. Because beneath the fluster, she swears she sees something else flicker there. Something raw, like he's holding back a truth he can't speak aloud. Like— He might *want* her to order him around.

She clears her throat a little too loudly.

So she reaches for another shard, deliberately casual, "…Well, guess I'll just have to be extra careful then. Wouldn't want to shock you into keeling over every time I open my mouth."

It earns her the smallest sound, a shaky and embarrassed laugh which is muffled behind his hand.

And though Branwen pretends to focus on the broken glass, she feels that sound settle somewhere deep, where it lingers… And she focuses on *that* a little too much to the point she completely misses that she reaches for a jagged piece at the same moment he does. Their foreheads knock together with a dull *thunk*.

"Ow," Branwen mutters, jerking back and rubbing the spot.

Jonas jerks back, wide-eyed, also rubbing at his temple. *Great,* not only is he completely flustered and red-faced, he's now got a look of complete mortification on his expression. As if bumping heads with her is some unspeakable crime.

She snorts, “I’ve taken kicks harder than that from the horses. I’ll live.”

His cheeks flame somehow redder, “I—I— d-didn’t mean—”

“Oh, quit apologizing,” She waves him off, reaching for another shard, “Actually, I changed my mind. Here’s an order from me: Relax.”

The words leave her mouth before she can think them through. She realises only after she says them what she’s done.

Jonas freezes, breath hitching sharp enough to cut the air. His knuckles blanch around the rim of the pail, grip so tight it looks like he’s anchoring himself to it. For a heartbeat Branwen swears he might burst apart on the spot, all nerves and shuddering breath.

She arches a brow, fighting the smile tugging at her mouth. She really shouldn’t be enjoying this as much as she is, “What, that too much for you?”

“I—n-no—I—” His voice cracks, and he ducks his head so fast his fringe nearly hides his eyes.

“Gods, you’re ridiculous. All this fuss over a broken lantern.”

Something slips from him then, low and muffled, almost too soft to catch. But she swears it’s, “N-not… t-the lantern…”

Her brows shoot up, pulse giving a strange lurch. She leans forward,

ready to pounce with a question. But before she can, Jonas snatches up another shard and tosses it into the pail with hurried precision. Too hurried. Like movement itself might smother whatever just escaped his mouth. Branwen narrows her eyes at him as suspicion prickles. There's more there, she can feel it. But she lets it go— For now.

"Alright then," She says instead, drawing out the words, "New order: Stop looking like you're about to faint and help me finish this mess before some poor stablehand cuts their foot open."

That, at least, he obeys without stammering. His nod is quick, almost relieved, and he bends to sweep up the last bits of glass.

They reach for the same shard again, but this time the only things that bump into each other are their knuckles. Their hands brush. Branwen doesn't pull away when it happens.

"Careful," She murmurs, softer now.

He looks up at her, just for an instant. Enough for her to see something unguarded in his eyes before he jerks his gaze down again, flustered as ever. Still, she catches it: the faintest smile tugging at his mouth, fragile and real.

Unsurprisingly, neither of them speak of what happened after they've finished cleaning up the lantern. They keep… whatever *that* was securely under lock and key.

6. The Nest

Jonas keeps glancing at the rafters during morning rounds.

Not just glancing. Pausing. Tilting his head like he hears something no one else does, which seems to be true. The stablehands don't notice. They never look up. But he does, every morning he's designated to the stables and kennels, hands folded behind his back like a proper servant, gaze slipping upward. To the crooked beam where a small nest is tucked in deep shadow.

He doesn't dare get closer. He knows better. There are sayings about nests, how they bring luck if left alone, how they sour if meddled with. So he watches from below, lips pressed thin, heart caught on the sight of a few pale strands of hay sticking out.

Birds, he tells himself, are messages. Sky-things. They come and go as they please. And if one chooses to settle here, under this roof, maybe it's a good sign. A protective one. He remembers a saying from his childhood: *Touch a nest and luck flies out with it.*

He never speaks of it. But he keeps looking. He's the closest to it when he's in the loft, it's partly the reason why he began exploring up there to begin with.

A few mornings later, Branwen speaks first. She doesn't look at him when she says it, only keeps her hands in the feed scoop, her voice flat, "They don't leave. Even when the weather gets bad."

His chest jolts. She knows.

"The birds," She adds.

Heat prickles at his ears. He hadn't thought she noticed his staring.

"T-they d–don't?" He asks, words tumbling out soft and careful.

"No," Branwen replies, shaking her head, "Dumb little things. Probably think the roof's the whole sky."

His chest loosens, warmth spilling slow and steady. He smiles— He can't help it. A smile that feels like the first warm coal catching in a cold stove.

She doesn't look at him, but he doesn't mind. The moment is enough.

Another day, while they're hauling tack across the yard, she says it out of nowhere:

"Chicks hiss when they're scared. Like snakes."

Jonas stops short, staring at her. She tosses the words so casually, like they don't matter. But to him, they do.

"The–t-they… h-hiss?" He echoes, too soft, too awed.

"They do it to fool predators. Neat little trick."

His chest tightens. He remembers another saying, one he'd half-

forgotten: *A bird that hisses guards the threshold twice.* He mouths the words without sound, fingers curling in the leather straps. She has no idea what she's given him. A shield, a ward. A reason to believe the rafters are doubly blessed.

He nods, unable to thank her without spilling the whole of his superstition.

After that, the nest is not only his secret. It is theirs.

They never say so. But when he lifts his gaze, he feels her eyes follow. From below, from a distance. Always careful. Never close enough to bother the luck the birds bring. The chicks grow louder and bolder. Their cries ring sharp in the air. *Good fortune,* he tells himself. Protection for all under this roof.

Then, one afternoon, a chick teeters on the edge of the rafter. Jonas's breath catches. His whole body goes rigid, braced for calamity. Wings flutter frantically, then the chick tumbles straight down into the hay. He gasps and claps a hand to his mouth. The hay stirs. The chick emerges, ruffled but alive. Relief bursts out of him in a breathy laugh — strange and startled, mostly foreign to his own ears.

Branwen turns. He can't stop the shaking in his shoulders, even as he muffles it with his palm.

"Gods' sakes," She mutters, shaking her head, "Hissing birds. Who'd believe it."

Jonas lowers his hand slowly, still smiling. The rafters creak above. The nest holds. And he thinks of another saying: *Bird that stays brings safe days.*

Later, passing through the hall that connects the stables and kennels, Jonas notices a book left open on a side table. An old bestiary, its pages browned and brittle. He stops, drawn closer. It's open and bookmarked to a familiar bird. Grey belly, dark throat. *Cloudcap Whistler.* The name is circled neat in ink. There are lines underlined. *Does not migrate. Chicks hiss when threatened.*

In the margin, in Branwen's hand: *Jonas's birds.*

Jonas stares until the letters blur. Slowly, carefully, he shuts the book.

And for once, he doesn't think of the old sayings. He doesn't need to.

Because Branwen has made her own.

7. The Visit

Jonas spots the carriage first, the gleam of lacquered wood rolling up the estate's long drive. He knows what it means immediately, the familiar crest on the door catching the sunlight. His stomach knots. The Lady's children rarely visit without bringing a whole storm of energy into the household. Servants scatter into a flurry of motion, voices rising and snapping like flags in the wind. Jonas lingers at the edge of the yard, hands clasped behind his back, trying to steady his breath.

He doesn't have long to linger. Branwen comes around the corner of the stables, brow already furrowed. She follows his gaze, sees the

carriage, and lets out a low groan.

“Wonderful,” She mutters, “One of the brood’s come home to roost.”

Jonas bites the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling too obviously, “Y-you s-s-say that l-like you d-don’t mi—m-miss them.”

Her eyes flick toward him incredulously, then narrow a little as though she’s making sure she’s heard him right, “Do I *look* like I miss them?”

Her face is all sharp lines and unimpressed stillness, the kind of expression that could curdle milk. Mouth set flat, brows slightly arched, eyes half-lidded as though the mere mention of The Lady’s children is enough to sap the will to live.

He dares a small grin, the words tumbling out before he can second-guess them, “Y-you look… t-thrilled.”

Branwen blinks. For a heartbeat, genuine surprise flashes across her face. He managed a joke, and she hadn’t expected it. Frankly, neither did he. Then her mouth curves, slow and sly.

“Well, well. Look who’s found his tongue.”

“J-just… d-didn’t think you’d m-mind seeing the–them.”

“Careful. Keep talking like that and people will think you’re getting bold.”

Jonas goes pink, his grin flickering wider before he ducks his head, “M-m-maybe I a-am.”

That earns him a laugh, “Bold Jonas. Uh huh. Next thing I know, you’ll be the one ordering me around.”

He nearly chokes.

“N-n-no, I—th-that’s not—”

A sharp grin forms on her lips as she leans dangerously close to him, clearly enjoying his fluster in a way he is utterly unprepared for, “What? Not so bold after all?”

Jonas stumbles over his own feet, heat rushing up his neck. He opens his mouth to protest, then shuts it again. His tongue is tied in knots, moreso than usual. Branwen mercifully leans back though her grin remains, and a tingle runs down his spine.

The carriage door suddenly opens and Jonas suddenly straightens in attention. Lady Alis steps out, tall and polished as ever, coat trimmed with embroidery that catches the sun. She carries herself with the practiced ease of a woman well aware of eyes on him. Jonas bows automatically, still flustered from Branwen.

Lady Alis’s gaze sweeps the yard, sharp, assessing, before landing on Branwen, “Ah. There you are, Marshal,” she says, as if Branwen has been summoned, not already standing there, “I’ve a matter to discuss, about the upcoming hunting party.”

Jonas's throat tightens. He hates how quickly his stomach drops at those words, how she'll be gone and busy with The Lady and her children's endeavours for who knows how long. But Branwen only lifts her chin.

"I'm busy," She replies flatly, "It'll wait. Unless you'd like to muck the pens with me."

Lady Alis's mouth twitches, a hint of amusement or annoyance—Jonas can't tell which. She inclines his head with aristocratic patience, "Very well. When you're done." And with that, she strides off toward the house, cloak swaying behind her and a gaggle of servants trailing behind.

Jonas's heart is still battering against his ribs when Branwen turns back toward him, as if nothing at all unusual just happened. She's got that crooked grin back on her mouth, sharp enough to slice through his nerves.

"Y-you—y-you just—th-that was—"

"Yeah, I dismissed her," Branwen shrugs one shoulder, utterly unbothered, "I said I was busy. And I am."

Jonas blinks.

"Busy speaking with you," She says it plain, though the corners of her mouth twitch up further when she sees how fast he colours at the admission, "I wasn't going to have our conversation interrupted. Doesn't matter who it is."

He makes a helpless little noise and rubs the back of his neck, “Y-you’re g-going to ge–g-get me k-killed one d-day.”

“What, for speaking to you? For having better things to do than listen to some prissy noble prattle about a hunt I’m already expected to oversee? Don’t flatter yourself, Jonas.”

But her tone is lighter than her words, teasing in a way that makes it even harder to breathe. He shakes his head quickly, lips twitching despite himself.

“Mm,” She hums, tilting her head at him like she’s caught him in some lie, “Maybe I should be careful. Keep teasing and Bold Jonas might actually make a reappearance.”

Jonas groans into his palms, half-laughing, half-mortified, “D-don’t call m-m-me th-that…”

“Why? It fits you. You punched Merrill in the face and then some. What’s that, if not bold?” She smirks, then leans just close enough that he can feel the heat roll off her, “Besides… I like it.”

Jonas forgets how to breathe for a moment. The words lodge in his chest, heavy and impossible, and he can’t look at her, not directly. He manages only a strangled, “Y-you’re t-terrible,” before his grin betrays him.

Branwen chuckles low, the sound rough and warm, and straightens again as if she hasn’t just sent him spinning.

“Maybe. But you’re still standing here talking to me, aren’t you?”

Jonas murmurs something that might be agreement, though his face is hot and his chest feels too light.

They stand there a moment longer, side by side, while the estate ripples with the energy of its returned eldest daughter.

8. The Nap

Branwen sits on the edge of the feed bins as she listens to the wind rattle loose boards against the stable wall. She's finished most of what she needed to do today. Horses settled. Kennels quiet. There is stillness as the sun slowly sets.

Jonas sits beside her, less at ease. His hands fidget with a rag, twisting it over itself, undoing the knot, tying it again. His eyes look tired, shadows smudged beneath them.

She catches herself staring longer than she means to.

He blinks, then leans back against the wall, the rag still tangled in his fingers, "C-Chores… in the h-h-house…" He murmurs, obviously not wanting to head back just yet but probably about to excuse himself.

"You'll drop where you stand if you do," She replies, "You know you can actually relax for five minutes, right?"

“I-I won’t dr–drop—” His protest is cut short by a yawn he tries, and fails, to stifle.

Branwen snorts, “Liar. Come on, relax. Not like someone like Merrill will give you grief for it. Not anymore, anyway.”

His lips twitch at that, the closest thing to a smile she’s seen all day. But he doesn’t argue further. He sits quietly instead, shoulders slumping a little against the boards. The silence stretches. The stables smell of hay and leather and faint woodsmoke carried in through the cracks. Dusk deepens. Branwen’s eyelids grow heavy, but she doesn’t close them. Too much to think about. Always too much.

Then— A weight on her shoulder.

At first, she tenses, at first thinking a horse got out and shifted behind her. Wouldn’t be the first time. But no. It’s Jonas. His head tilts against her shoulder, slow as a dropped leaf. His hair brushes the side of her neck. His breathing steadies, long and even.

Branwen goes stiff.

She stares straight ahead, heart hammering. *Fuck.* What does one do when a servant— no, when *he*— falls asleep on you like this? She should move. She knows she should. Any moment a hand might push open the stable door, a voice might call out, and there she’ll be, pinned under the boy’s head like some absurd portrait of impropriety.

But she doesn’t move. Not yet.

Instead, she glances down.

He looks even younger like this, all the lines of worry gone slack. His mouth is soft, parted slightly with sleep. Eyelashes dark against his skin. His cheek rests warm against her shoulder. He's so rarely at ease, so often folded in on himself, tripping over his tongue or ducking his gaze. To see him stilled like this, trusting enough to surrender the weight of himself against her, it unsettles something deep in her chest.

"Fool," She mutters under her breath, more to herself than him.

Still, she sits there too long. Watches the rise and fall of his chest. Counts the breaths without meaning to. Until the sound of laughter drifts from outside— stablehands, finishing their own rounds.

Branwen's blood jumps cold.

She shifts carefully, inch by inch, sliding her shoulder free. Jonas murmurs something, half-formed, but doesn't wake. His head dips, nearly falling. Branwen curses softly and catches him before he can topple sideways.

Carefully, with more gentleness than she'd ever admit to, she eases him back against the wall. The rag slips from his hands, forgotten. She eyes the pile of spare tack-cloths, thinks better of it, and instead fetches a small pillow from the corner cot where stablehands sometimes nap between shifts. It's not much, thin and a little lumpy, but better than the stone wall.

She tucks it behind his head, fingers brushing the edge of his hair. *Too close.* She pulls back quick, shaking it off.

Jonas exhales, long and contented, and never stirring.

Branwen straightens and rolls her shoulders as though to rid herself of the strange tightness in them. She means to leave, to slip away before any of the stablehands wander in and start whispering. But she pauses at the threshold, glancing back once more before leaving him be.

His nap is short. Branwen muses that Jonas is physically incapable of relaxing for very long. He wakes with a start, blinking as though he's been caught doing something shameful. His eyes flick to the rafters, then the door, then to Branwen standing nearby with her arms crossed.

"I—I fell a-a-asleep," He blurts, mortified.

"Evidently," She says flatly to cover the jolt of warmth in her chest.

He pushes himself upright too quickly, nearly upsetting the pillow. Doesn't even seem to notice it's there. His cheeks are flushed as he scrambles to his feet, muttering about chores left undone, about needing to finish before nightfall.

And then he's gone, rag clutched tight in his hand as he vanishes down the row of stalls.

Branwen exhales slowly. Then she shakes her head.

His face lingers in her mind. That unguarded softness, all the sharp edges of him dulled by sleep. For a moment, she almost wishes he could stay that way.

9. The Shadows & Biscuits

Jonas notices it at the door. Branwen doesn't step straight through anymore. She pauses— just for a breath, maybe two— eyes flicking to the lintel like she's measuring the air there. Then she crosses.

He doesn't say anything. He barely breathes.

The *Shadow Crossing* is close enough now that even his pulse feels unsettled, the fair folk always quick and always listening. He knows she doesn't believe, she's said as much with that blunt tone of hers that cuts straight through the kind of talk that knots him up. *"Superstitious nonsense,"* she'd called it once. But still. She waits at the threshold.

And sometimes she tilts her head at the deeper shadows in the corners of the stable, like she's deciding if it's worth stepping near them. The rules are, naturally, second nature for him. Don't cross where shadows pool too thickly. Not without protection. She pretends she's just scanning the place like she always does, but Jonas sees. He sees it every time.

Once, she left shortbread on a nearby bench, or in his mail cubby, or some other slightly unseen area and wrapped in cloth. *The spiritual envoy,* looking out for him and leaving signs. He's never forgotten the feel of the paper, the sugar grit against his teeth. These days Branwen doesn't bother with hiding it. She just presses a few biscuits into his hand, muttering something about him looking like he'll faint if he misses another meal. And then they sit. On an upturned bucket, or the hay-bale by the stalls. Sometimes she talks. Sometimes she doesn't.

The silences aren't empty.

He takes small bites, careful not to scatter crumbs. She chews quicker, brushing her palms together like she's got better things to do, though she never actually leaves until he's finished his share.

Jonas keeps waiting for the moment she'll roll her eyes and say she's done with it. That she's tired of humouring him. But it doesn't come. She keeps waiting at thresholds. Keeps handing him biscuits outright, no pretence.

"You think I'm… something more than I am."

She's right. He does.

He understands what she meant. He isn't daft, despite what he might think of himself on bad days. She wanted him to stop seeing her as some envoy or spirit-marked guardian. She's flesh and bone, same as him. She makes mistakes, forgets things, sighs when she's tired, curses when the lantern smokes.

But— *still.*

She presses biscuits into his hand like it matters if he eats. She keeps showing up at thresholds, hesitating in a way she never used to. She lets him talk about the *Shadow Crossing* even when she scoffs. And she doesn't walk away.

Jonas chews slow and quiet in the hush between them. Branwen leans

back against the stall rail, her arms crossed, eyes half-lidded like she'd rather be napping than sharing biscuits with him. But she's here. She stays until the last crumb is gone, as though she knows the rules as well as he does— That you never break bread with someone and leave before they've finished, not if you mean to honour the moment.

He doesn't need her to be spirit-marked. Doesn't need her to be an envoy or omen.

It's enough— *more than enough*— that she is Branwen.

And he believes in Branwen the way others have faith in gods, or how he believes in the fair folk: Without proof, without sense, and without end.

10. The Blood

One early morning, Branwen is hunched on a stool. The ache has been building since dawn, coiling low in her belly like iron nails. It's the same every moon, but this one is worse— Her cycle gnawing from the inside, jagged as if her body has grown its own thorns.

Other women mutter about their first cramps, about the nuisance of a day spent bleeding and back at work by evening. She's heard her own sisters complain about it. Branwen bites her tongue. Still, she knows she is different. A visiting physician once called it *Deep Bloom Disease,* another *Thornwomb,* as if her womb itself sprouts roots and barbs, clawing at the rest of her body. Whatever the name, the pain is hers to manage.

She shifts, hand pressed against her lower abdomen, waiting for the wave to pass. Her thighs ache, her back tightens and sweat gathers along her hairline though the air is cool. She breathes through her teeth. She has work yet— those damn horses and hounds won't take care of themselves. She could order stablehands to do extra work while she recovers, but she's not about to complain like some fragile noble with a trained physician on command.

Still, a flicker of bitterness rises unbidden. The younger stablehands snicker when they swap rags or herbal packets. The moonblood is a passing, monthly nuisance for them, occasionally painful but nothing more. Branwen knows the difference too well. Theirs is a tide; hers, a storm.

Her hand brushes the pouch tied at her belt. Dried willowbark, crumbled fennel seed, a pinch of moon-mint. Poor tools, but better than nothing. She tips some powder onto her tongue, grimacing at the bitterness, and drinks from the bucket by the door.

The worst part is knowing it will happen again. Next month, and the month after. No wonder men are so fragile if they never have to deal with *this.* They don't know the first thing of pain.

Branwen pushes herself upright, steadying against the stall door. Pain is no excuse, not here. Not in her life. She's lived with it long enough to know that no one— no healer, no herb, no kind word— will carry it for her.

So she shoulders it herself.

By mid-afternoon, the yard is quiet. The dogs are dozing, bellies round from feed, and the mares flick their tails lazily in the stalls. Branwen

slips into a tack room, changes her rag to something that's not bloodied, shuts the door, and lowers herself gingerly onto the straw mat she keeps rolled in the corner.

The pain hasn't eased. It's shifted, sharp one moment and dull the next, like her insides are being tugged by invisible threads. She presses the heel of her hand against her lower belly, then digs her fingers in deeper, kneading the flesh in slow circles. It isn't proper training, not the way a womb-healer might do it, but she vaguely remembers watching some of them work in her village, enough to mimic the motions. She wishes she could have studied their massages more, but she never could have anticipated that her monthly bleedings would apparently be so much more painful than everyone else's… or that everything would get destroyed in that fucking flood.

Firm pressure near the hips. Slow dragging strokes across the lower abdomen. Thumb pressed hard against the knot of pain until it eases by a breath.

Her breaths come shallow, sweat beading at her temple, but little by little the ache loosens. Not gone, never gone, but dulled enough she can stand again without gritting her teeth.

She thinks of the Womb Guilds, the gatherings some women hold in townships or city quarters. A space for sharing herbs, poultices, stretches, and gossip about which midwife or herbalist knows more than the others. Branwen has heard of them, even sat in on one or two when she was younger, listening to older women talk about how their moonblood misbehaved, how it wandered and pooled and left scars inside.

There are specialized doctors, too. Scar-Bloomers, the nobles call them. Elite doctors with silver instruments and schooling in the capital, trained to cut out crimson roots or burn away thorned tissue. But Branwen has never seen one. Not for the likes of her. Scar-Bloomers treat noble daughters, wives, and council matrons. Not a

servant from the Freeholds, not someone who smells of hay and hound. She just gets the normal physicians.

So she does what she can with her own hands, pressing and kneading until the worst of the fire dwindles to a coal.

And she keeps doing her work, until she is able to retire to her private quarters during the night.

Her room is tucked just off the kennels, a narrow space built from leftover stone when the stables were expanded years back. It isn't much. It's four walls with a low-beamed ceiling, and a door that swells in damp weather. But it is hers. A cot runs along one side, plain and serviceable, with a wool blanket she mended herself. A pegboard holds her few belongings: a spare tunic, a heavy coat, a pair of gloves gone shiny with wear. There's a little table under the window where she keeps a stubby candle and, more often than not, a stray horseshoe or a cracked brush she means to repair.

From here, the smell of hay and animal musk seeps through the plaster, joined by the faint rattle of chains when the dogs stir in their sleep. It's not silence, not quite, but it's the kind of quiet Branwen can live with. Besides, she needs to be nearby and hear if anything startles or bothers the animals anyway.

Tonight, the courtyard is dark when she unlatches the window. Cool air rolls in, damp with the summer night, carrying the faint drip of water through the eaves. A moth knocks against the sill, and somewhere down the row of stalls, a horse stamps and exhales.

She shuts the door firmly behind her, leans a moment against the frame, and lets the weight of the day slide heavy through her bones. By the time Branwen settles into her cot, the candle has burned low, wax pooling against the chipped dish she keeps at her bedside. She

sits hunched, shoulders stiff, now with an old medical tome sitting heavy across her knees.

The Compendium of Womb & Moon: A Medical Reference for the Gentlewoman

Published in the Year of Our Matron 1877 | By the Royal Academy of Womb Studies, High Hall, Cindergate

Third Bloom Syndrome

Classification: Severe Moon-Blood Malalignment Disorder
Also Known As: Crimson Rooting, Internal Blooming, Thornwomb Syndrome

“There are women whose bodies do not part with the sacred blood cleanly, but rather misplace it — within tissue, sinew, or even the hollow of the gut. This misplaced blood, rather than escaping, blooms anew with every moon, causing sharp agony, fatigue, and inner scarring.”

—High Physician Merithe Vale, Matron of the Inner Sciences

Symptoms:

-Debilitating pelvic pain, recurring with lunar regularity

-Bloodless bleeding: sensation of menses without external flow

-Fatigue, fainting, and internal "drag"

-Occasional pain during intimate congress

-Barrenness not uncommon, though not guaranteed

Diagnosis:

-Confirmed by heat-scrying (application of warmed moonroot oil and cloth — pain response is diagnostic)

-Often accompanied by abdominal tenderness, and the presence of "veiled scarring" upon internal examination

-Family history often present— marked in the womb-books of noble houses

Treatment:

-Redthorn & Blackmoon tincture (taken nightly during the waning moon)

-Abdominal firestones (worn under corsetry for pain alleviation)

-Moonfasting— ritualized rest on the first and second days of bleeding

In rare cases: Womb-purging vapours administered under the guidance of a certified Scar-Bloomer

Prognosis:

This condition, while painful, is not fatal. Many great women— scholars, queens, artists— have been known to carry the Thornwomb. Some believe the fire within to be a divine mark.

She has read dozens like it before. Pamphlets borrowed, hand-copied leaflets passed from servant to servant, even a guild scroll once smuggled from a healer's hall, but this one is new. The pages smell of ink and starch, the diagrams precise, drawn with the confidence of a scholar who has never mucked a stall in her life. Still, Branwen traces the lines with her fingertip, following the neat arcs of womb and

vessel, thorn and scar.

Symptoms. Diagnosis. Treatments. All familiar. Redthorn tincture— Too weak. Firestones— She's tried, left welts on her skin. Moonfasting — Useless when The Lady expects the kennels and stables taken care of regardless of what her body's doing.

But then her eyes catch on a line she cannot seem to skip past. *Occasional pain during intimate congress.*

Her breath stills. She stares.

It's not as though the thought should matter. She's never spared it space before. Not after the flood, not after the long walk to the estate, not through the years of tending hounds and horses. She hasn't had time, nor inclination, to imagine her body in that way, pressed close to another's. She's always thought of herself as soil left fallow: Useful in other labours, never turned toward *that.*

And yet, unbidden, his face flickers across her mind. *Jonas.*

The thought unsettles her. Him, with his downcast eyes and careful hands, with that stuttered gentleness that tugs at something she does *not* want tugged. She swallows, jaw tight, as if that might scatter the image.

Her cheeks feel hot. Foolish. Dangerous.

She presses the heel of her palm against her brow, muttering under her breath, "Enough. Don't be daft."

Occasional pain during intimate congress. She tries to banish the thought again, burying it beneath work lists for the morning— grain to measure, straw to cut, bridles to oil— but the memory of Jonas's face, earnest and steady in those moments he finds his footing, keeps slipping back like water through a crack.

Perhaps that is why she doesn't close the book. Instead, Branwen's eyes skim lower on the page, down to an appendix she's always skipped in other writings. *Curiosities & Male Ailments.*

On the Male Humours

The Wandering Seed: On the Vagaries of Male Reproductive Humour

"Men, possessing no regular purgation of humours like women do, are subject to erratic internal build-up of seed. This may lead to discontent, over-aggression, or bouts of melancholy. Some claim discomfort in the lower regions, but this is likely psychosomatic, as no such organs are verified to require maintenance."

—Doctor Hannisia Fell, Professor Emerita of Andric Curiosities, Lower Hall, Royal Academy

Common Complaints:

-Ache in the groin after periods of idleness

-Swelling of the lower glands (often self-reported and unsubstantiated)

-Moodiness or brooding behavior

-"Unspent urges" leading to social agitation

Theoretical Causes:

-Excess idle seed due to celibacy or intellectual boredom

-Internal steam accumulation (due to lack of grounding via childrearing duties)

-Maternal deficiency during nursing years

Suggested Remedies:

-Cold baths or quick walks in the country

-Reading aloud in social company to expel internal tensions

-Marital congress (when available) to draw out excess seed, if needed

-Avoidance of solitude and study, which may ferment the condition

Note:

Repeated complaints of "testicular agony" may indicate malingering or a desire for social exemption. While the male body is a curious thing, it is prone to dramatic misreporting, especially among the idle classes.

The accompanying sketch strikes her first. It's seemingly half-finished, as if the drafter lost their nerve. A bulbous outline, vague lines suggesting… what, exactly? The accompanying text names it *the Sac of Emissions,* which makes her snort despite the ache in her belly. She can't help but mutter, "Sac of nonsense, more like."

The prostate, apparently, is some useless little lump, a curiosity without clear purpose. The rest is worse— Condescending lines about *'wandering seed,'* about men brooding or sulking because their

humours have no proper outlet.

Branwen snorts again, louder this time, shaking her head, “Melancholy from too much sitting?”

And yet, her eyes snag despite herself. *Ache in the groin after periods of idleness. Swelling of the lower glands. Unspent urges.*

The words shouldn’t land, but they do. Because she thinks again— suddenly, far too vividly— of Jonas. And beneath his uniform… these strange, useless organs the book can barely name. She’s not entirely ignorant. Branwen *has* accidentally been inside a brothel. She knows how a man looks nude. But she doesn’t know how *Jonas looks*—

The thought hits her hard enough that she nearly hurls the heavy tome across the room. She clamps it shut instead, palms flat against the cover as though she can press the image out of her head.

“Gods,” She growls under her breath, dragging a hand down her face, “He’s a scrawny thing. Why in all hells am I—”

She doesn’t finish the sentence. Doesn’t dare.

The diagrams are clinical, ridiculous. There is *nothing* stirring about them, no more rousing than a butcher’s chart of hog anatomy. And yet her chest feels hot and unsettled. She tells herself it’s the pain in her belly, the long day, the useless pomp of noble doctors who know nothing of real bodies.

Still, Jonas lingers at the edges of her thoughts. Him, and what lies beneath his servant’s livery. The memory creeps in, his body bent

over, trousers loose at his thighs, her own hand smoothing salve into the welted skin. Now… now it hits her differently.

His skin had been warm. Alive under her fingers. His breath caught, shallow and sharp, every time she touched near a stripe. She hadn't let herself dwell on it then, because it was necessity, nothing more. But remembering it now sends an odd shiver down her arms, like heat spilling out of a banked coal. Branwen's jaw clenches. She doesn't want to picture him like *that*— Vulnerable and half-bared, trusting her when he could trust no one else. And yet her mind won't stop there. It sketches the rest of him: His narrow shoulders, paler than his face from too much time in shadowed halls; the length of his neck, where a pulse had fluttered fast when she teased him; the fine wrists he hides under those ruffly sleeves.

And his face. Always his face. That soft, stubborn mouth he chews ragged with nerves. The brown of his eyes that deepens, unexpectedly warm, when he looks at her in the way that makes something stutter in her chest.

Branwen squeezes her eyes shut, presses the heel of her hand to her brow as though she can grind the thoughts out.

And yet. She can't shake the image of him asleep on her shoulder, lips slack, lashes dark against his cheek. Or the way whenever he murmurs a *"thank you"* in that trembling voice.

Branwen rakes her fingers through her hair, scowling at the floor. She exhales sharply through her nose and begins burying herself beneath her blanket, and fixes her mind on literally anything else. But the image refuses to wholly leave, faint as an aftertaste.

And then she nearly jumps out of her skin at a knock.

She shoves the book under a stack of old feed invoices, dragging her blanket across her lap as if that might somehow erase what she'd just been thinking. Her pulse leaps into her throat, half from the guilty thought she'd been entertaining, half from the sheer surprise that anyone would come by this late. No one dares bother her when she's slinked off into her private quarters. One of the stablehands must have a death wish.

"This better be an emergency—" She begins, then bites it off when the door creaks open a crack. Jonas's pale face peers in, hesitant, his hair falling into his eyes.

"Y-you're—" He starts, then swallows, tries again, "Y-you're awake?"

Branwen exhales hard, more flustered than she wants to show, "...Clearly. What's this about?"

He steps in sheepishly, and only then does she see what he's carrying: A steaming cup, both hands wrapped around it like he's afraid to spill. He edges closer and sets it on her table before stepping back. The faint smell of warm milk and honey drifts up.

"I… I th-thought it m-might h-help."

For a moment, she can only blink at him. Her gut still aches, her cheeks are uncomfortably hot, and here he is, turning up in the middle of the night with milk mixed with honey like some nursemaid.

"You shouldn't be skulking around so late," She mutters a little too quickly, but her voice comes out gruff-soft rather than sharp, "If Maud catches you—"

Jonas shakes his head quickly, “It’s n-nothing. I j-just… noticed. You’re… every m-month, about this t-time…” He trails off, visibly searching for words, his stutter worse for the effort, “Y-you walk s-slower. Y-you press your si–s-side. You s-sit down more, b-but pretend not to.”

Branwen freezes. He can’t *possibly* know— can he? Does he even know how a woman’s body works? Would he have been taught that, wherever he’s from? She stares at him, heat prickling across her scalp, “Noticed what, exactly?”

He looks at the floor, his hands twitching and shifting from foot to foot. His shoulders are slightly hunched as though ready to retreat if she snaps, “Th-that y-you… h-hurt… Ev-every month.” He risks a glance up, earnest and almost boyish, “So I b-brought this. T-thought it m-might… help.”

The words land like an arrow. He just sounds worried.

Branwen clears her throat, hoping it disguises the sudden rush in her chest, “Gods, Jonas. You… you didn’t need to—”

“I w-wanted to.”

Silence stretches. The candle flickers. Branwen finds herself tugging the blanket tighter, not against pain this time but to cover how rattled she is. She clears her throat again, this time the sound comes out rougher.

“Well. You should go on before you catch Maud’s eye. And… thank you.”

Jonas nods, clearly relieved she hasn't bitten his head off, and slips back toward the door, leaving the cup behind. Branwen doesn't touch it right away. She stares at the faint steam curling up, the smell of honey, the mark of his careful hands.

Then she reaches for the cup. Branwen exhales into the silence. Between the tome's ridiculous diagrams and Jonas's wide-eyed thoughtfulness, she feels completely undone.

It's late. Men shouldn't be out after dark and… There is surely a ghost story or some bullshite about fair folk— she hasn't *seriously* been entertaining the *Shadow Crossing,* thank you very much— that would have surely made Jonas hesitate on making the journey in the darkness. Yet he still made the trek. Maybe she's thinking too much about that… Maybe even giving him too much credit, acting like he's made some type of pilgrimage… but he got her a cup of something sweet because he noticed she wasn't feeling her best.

And that's just something else on top of everything else so fucking *endearing* about him.

And she hates, more than anything, how little she hates it.

Chapter End Notes

Branwen has endometriosis and ovarian cysts which make her periods significantly more painful. I mainly wanted an excuse to explore more worldbuilding lol. In a matriarchy women's medicine would be more studied and a higher priority in general but also in this time period technology isn't quite advanced enough for them to know things accurately yet, hence what's written in the medical tome. I kinda don't want her period to be one time thing so maybe it'll happen again idk.

Also lol it's (somehow) been over 100K words and I feel like Branwen and Jonas haven't interacted enough. So. Hence this chapter. Also shoutout to linsanity4ever who correctly deduced that both Bran and Jonas are virgins lmao.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Covenant Day.

In name, it is a single holy day. In practice, it sprawls into a week of sermons, feasts, and pageantry— A season within a season. And completely unrelated bullshite. Branwen has never cared much for its meanings. The priestesses call it a remembrance of the *First Binding*, when the goddess Alira smote her husband and yoked him to her service, teaching all men to kneel thereafter. They say the world was chaos before that: men, formed from dirt and molded by women, roaming unbound, burning the land with temper and ambition, until Alira placed her foot upon her husband's brow and storms were stilled. From that act, the Eastern Dominions claim their order, their empire, their right to rule.

And every year since, women have gone in temples to reenact Alira's triumph, and men have washed the mud from their feet to prove their humility in an act called the Laying of the Cloak.

Every sermon, every hymn, every bow or wash of feet ties back to that myth. Wives over husbands, mistresses over servants, queens over colonies. A story sharpened into a blade. Branwen's people in the Freeholds told it differently. Long ago, before the floods, her mother said Alira was not a goddess but a spirit of the rivers, wild, half-kind, and indifferent. The *First Binding,* her mother said, was a caution: when one hand binds another, both are trapped.

But the Freeholders' stories didn't make it into the Dominion catechisms. Having no noble overseer assures that never happens. The nobility prefers the version that justifies its hierarchy, the one where

Alira's victory makes the world safe, orderly, and most importantly, obedient to the Dominion. Their churches call it divine harmony. Branwen calls it awfully convenient.

After the flood, she stopped calling it anything at all.

Now, it's just a long week of work. She stands watching the mud swallow boot prints and thinks how fitting it is that the holy week falls in the wettest season.

Rain from last night hasn't stopped the preparations, it's only made them more miserable. The grass on The Lady's lawn is slick and black, the paths between the tents churned into brown rivers by wagon wheels and boot heels. Branwen stands beneath the eaves of the kennels, hands on her hips, watching the churn of activity across the estate grounds. Servants haul crates through the mud. Lanterns swing from the long ropes strung between trees, their glass still fogged from last night's downpour.

She stares at the mud and puddles a little longer than she really should. She wonders briefly if Jonas had a version of Alira. Maybe he and his family just stuck with the fair folk. The thought serves as a good enough distraction to shake herself off.

The Lady's estate treats Covenant Day as sacred, and the household is expected to gleam like a shrine. Branwen's already sent the stablehands to brush every horse twice and scrub the tack until it shines. In another hour, the first guests will arrive. There'll be too many of them, all nobles of varying rank, each desperate to stand in The Lady's good graces. Branwen can already hear laughter from the upper fields, where the archery targets have been set. Only women will compete, of course; men are not permitted to carry weapons. She doesn't know what archery has to do with the myth, but well, she's never really paid enough attention to it to know its specifics.

The men have their own amusements— Pageants of humility, mock sermons, little plays where they pretend to be thankful for their mistresses' mercy. Branwen's seen enough of them to last a lifetime.

All these activities will be done regardless of how hard the rain gets. There's going to be mud fucking *everywhere*.

What's left of last night's rain just drips from the stable roof and down the back of her neck. She wipes her hands on her trousers and exhales through her nose.

The estate hums like a hive. Everywhere she looks, someone is rushing. Boys drag garlands of damp greenery toward the verandah, their sleeves soaked to the sleeves from sweat and puddles. Maids and stewards pass in pairs, balancing covered trays meant for tables protected by an overhead tarp. One of the gardeners curses under her breath as she fights with a wagon wheel stuck in the muck. The festival has only just begun, and already the staff look as though they've survived a siege.

Branwen moves among them, checking harness buckles, the lines of the horse teams, the baskets lashed to the supply carts. The kennels are half-empty. Most of the hounds have been led up toward the northern paddocks, where a mock hunt will open the week's games.

A stablehand jogs up behind her, boots squelching, "Marshal! The farrier says the grey's thrown a shoe again. Wants to know if she's to re-shoe her before the march or after."

“Before,” Branwen replies, “And tell her not to let the mare stand in the mud. I don’t need her hoof going soft again.”

The girl nods and runs off, splattering mud up the back of her legs.

A streak of motion catches her eye then. Jonas, crossing the courtyard with a stack of folded linens. He’s headed toward the main house, careful not to slip on the wet flagstones. Even at a distance she recognises the stiffness in his shoulders, the quiet concentration that makes her want to—

She pulls her gaze away. She should get to work.

Before too long, a trumpet sounds from the main lawn. It’s a thin and reedy noise in the damp air. The Lady’s herald, announcing the start of the first arrivals. Branwen catches a glimpse of carriages through the mist, liveried drivers guiding teams along the gravelled drive. One by one, noblewomen step out beneath parasols, their husbands and sons trailing like decorative shadows behind them.

The ground is thick from the rain, a churn of hoofprints and trampled reeds. Branwen moves through it like she was made for it, calling orders over the snort and steam of arriving horses.

“Hunting Marshal, isn’t it?” One of the noblewomen calls. She’s tall, too clean for the weather, with a voice trained to carry. Branwen tries not to openly grimace at her overbearing perfume, “Lady Hareth of the Covenant Circle. I’m to speak the Benediction at the opening feast.”

Branwen dips her head, just enough to be polite, and takes the reins from the woman’s driver, “Best get your boots cleaned before The Lady sees you, then. It’s mud clear up to the stables.”

Lady Hareth laughs like she didn't catch the tone, "Ah, but the mud is sacred today. The priestesses say it's the mark of our Mother's renewal. Covenant Day is such a blessed season for women, don't you think?"

Branwen keeps her eyes on the horse's bit, checking the teeth, "Wouldn't know, my lady. Mostly I think of it as wet."

The noblewoman laughs softly, as if amused by some private joke, "Practical as ever, the Freeholders. No wonder The Lady keeps you." She turns back toward the waiting servants, "Do see that my things are carried to the east wing, won't you? And remind the boys to keep their heads down during the blessings. There's nothing so unsightly as a man who forgets his humility."

Branwen watches her go, all silk hems and pious chatter. She's heard that sort of talk before, about vows and blessings and men being brought low in honour of their betters. Once, long ago, she might've tried to make sense of it. But whatever gods the Dominion keeps, they've never done her a favour. She can't name most in the pantheon nor does she care to. She's never been inside a church and tunes out any sermons she may overhear in passing whenever she goes to town. Working with the hounds and horses also means she can avoid whatever prayers The Lady or other nobles may have inside the house. Covenant Day is the most she's ever exposed to any of this holy nonsense.

The next carriage nearly clips a water trough when it pulls in, some overexcited colt hitched to a driver too soft-handed to manage him. Branwen's already there before the driver can panic, stepping into the mud and catching the bit with a sharp tug.

"Easy," She murmurs, low and certain. The horse tosses its head once, twice, then settles under the weight of her voice. She pats its neck,

feeling the tremor run out of it, “There. Not the end of the world.”

The young driver stammers out a thank-you, all pale cheeks and embarrassment. Branwen just jerks her chin toward the stables, “Walk him round till he stops sweating. And check your traces next time.”

A bark breaks out behind her. One of the hounds gone half-mad at the scent of strangers. Branwen whistles, sharp and two-toned, and the dog stills mid-lunge. The other handlers glance over, then go back to work. Everyone knows better than to cross her when she’s in her element. By midday the yard is crowded. Carriages from across the Dominions keep rolling in, bearing guests and crates and chatter. A covered caravan stops near one of the kitchens, the women inside laughing as porters unload boxes stamped with foreign seals— Spices, silks, carved ornaments from lands Branwen’s only ever seen in the papers.

“The finest pepper from the Southern Isles,” One of the noblewomen announces, waving her gloved hand as if she owns the wind itself, “And cocoa, can you imagine? Such generosity from our colonies. The Eastern Dominions are blessed with our reach.”

Branwen’s hand stills on the latch of one of the stable gates. The air smells of horse sweat and damp earth, but underneath it, sharp and sweet, is something she doesn’t have a name for. It makes her skin itch.

She can’t think about the colonies without feeling small. She thinks of the maps she’s seen when she’s in The Lady’s office. Gold lines of trade curling out like vines, all leading back to the Dominion’s heart. And she, a Freeholder without a name, just another speck in it.

“Marshal, we’ll need another stall cleared—”

“I know,” She cuts in, voice steady. “On it.”

She turns back to the hounds, busying her hands. It’s easier to think about teeth and tack than the weight of empires. The laughter of the noblewomen fades as they move toward the manor, and Branwen stays where she belongs, ankle-deep in mud, the work loud enough to drown the rest out. When the bells from a faraway manor chapel start ringing— Sharp, hollow things that carry through the mist— Branwen barely hears them anymore.

She’s learned to let that sound slide off her like rainwater.

By the time the last carriage from the outlying villages rattles in, the estate hums like a storm caught between walls and sky. The main hall is dressed for Covenant Day. Sprays of hawthorn and dried rushes bound to the pillars, ribbon-strung lanterns swaying in the draught from open courtyard doors. Sunlight breaks through the drifting showers in brief, golden slivers, catching on gilt platters, polished banisters, and the trim of noble coats.

It isn’t just The Lady’s household anymore. Every corner of the Eastern Dominion’s hierarchy has found its way here. Matrons in deep-dyed silks, their shawls trailing like banners; husbands in modest wool, each cut to flatter without challenging the dignity of his wife; younger sons with hair oiled and tied back, moving between boyish mischief and the stiff posture drilled into them.

The courtyards are worse. Crowded with musicians testing strings and pipes, boys in pale tunics rehearsing their humility pageants with exaggerated bows, and hawkers from the town who’ve been granted

permission to sell spiced nuts, candied fruits, and wreaths of sage and rue to ward away ill-luck. All, of course, are covered in mud from the sodden ground.

From his place among the servants, Jonas watches the invisible web of rank pull and sway with each movement. Noble husbands greet one another with the careful formality of men whose fortunes depend on their wives' favour. The kitchen wing hums like a struck hive, kitchen boys carrying trays of sugared biscuits and plum wine to the outer tables, where lower-ranking guests can feast without stepping inside.

There is a small army of servants washing the mud off the floor from the higher-ranked guests that *are* granted permission to come inside.

Jonas knows what's coming later, after the pageants and speeches and servants: the Laying of the Cloak. The thought tugs at him the way superstition always does, half-comfort, half-unease. He knows its weight. He's caught glimpses of how the room stills when the basins are brought in, the way the kneeling man's cloak pools around him like an unspoken confession. Even among servants, it carries a sting. You kneel in silence, head bowed, offering not just hands but the station you've been given, however meagre, to the woman who stands over you. Those who have no one to kneel to— no mistress, no matron, no family— sit apart, their absence as loud as a bell.

He supposes he's grateful that Maud's chore chart has designated him to mostly outside work this year. At least the lower-ranked nobles' display of Lying of the Cloak is less ostentatious and loud… But it'll be visible all the same. And he'll watch as an outsider, as usual.

For now, though, the air is full of laughter, music, and the clink of glass. The estate is swollen with life, The Lady's reach on full display, and every path from the front gate to the far paddocks is pressed under the tread of fine boots.

Jonas keeps to the west hall, weaving between the crowded corridors with a tray balanced carefully in his hands. The caning on his backside is mostly a harsh and ugly memory now, but he still half-expects a dull agony to flare up every time he takes a step. It makes him shift his weight without thinking.

Guests call for refills, boys darting between tables with fresh bread, the occasional burst of laughter from The Lady's guests. Jonas steps around a cluster of young noble husbands deep in polite conversation, careful not to clip their robes, and makes for the long table near the wall. He doesn't see Fenn until the other servant's shoulder clips his hard, a deliberate shove that sends Jonas lurching sideways. The cups jostle dangerously, one threatening to tip, but Jonas catches the weight in time, tightening his grip until his knuckles go pale.

"Ah, nearly had you," Fenn says under his breath, his tone dripping with satisfaction, "Careful. Wouldn't want to take another trip to the steward's hall for a fresh caning for dropping stuff."

Jonas keeps walking.

Fenn falls in beside him, voice low enough to avoid anyone else's ears but sharp all the same, "Shame about the caning. Some say you were howling, others silent. Which was it? And what was it again— ten?" He smirks, "Not that Branwen minded. Heard she was the one patching you up. You've been spending a lot of time together. Guess she's got a soft spot for lost little lambs. She must have liked having you limp about for her."

Jonas's ears burn, but he doesn't slow. The words scrape at the raw place inside him, but there's something else too. Something that makes him straighten rather than shrink. He draws in a breath, shifts the tray to one hand, and speaks before he can lose the nerve.

“Y-yo–you sh-should… m-mind y-your own t-tasks,” He says, each word pulled like thread from a stubborn spool, “Or m-maybe… I’ll tell M-Ma–Maud w-where y-you’ve been hi–hiding.”

For a moment, the smirk falters, confusion flickering in its place. Fenn doesn’t answer, and Jonas doesn’t give him the chance. He steps past, his pulse pounding in his ears, the platter still level in his hands.

It’s only once he’s halfway down the next corridor that he realises he’s breathing hard, not from the weight, not from the walk, but from the sharp, almost giddy edge of speaking back. Merrill and Fenn no longer feel like threats to him. He can and will speak back.

For once, he leaves someone else frozen in his wake.

When the sun drags itself overhead, the festival is in full sprawl across the estate. The Lady’s pastures and outer courtyards have turned into a tangle of carriages, tents, and makeshift stalls. Smoke rises from roasting pits; banners of house colours drip in the damp air. The mud never quite dries, only spreads on boots, hems, and the gleaming hooves of too many borrowed horses.

Branwen has been on her feet since dawn. Her coat is streaked with mud from a hound that decided to greet her mid-leap, and there’s a sore spot along her wrist where a skittish mare caught her with the reins.

She’s dealt with a couple of mock hunts by now. A pack of hounds is released, these ones half-trained and overexcited, chasing after a servant dragging a scented lure through the woods. Branwen keeps to the edge, trying to keep the chaos from turning into injury. When one of the younger noblewomen yanks her hound’s lead too hard and

sends it snapping at another's flank, Branwen's patience snaps in turn.

"Don't yank like that," She says, flat and sharp, "You'll ruin her windpipe."

The noblewoman blinks, affronted, "I've been hunting since I was a child—"

"Then you should know better," Branwen clicks her tongue at the hound, crouching to steady it and gives a quick and firm correction, "Hounds don't need showmanship. Just a steady hand."

The woman mutters something under her breath, but Branwen's already walking off. She hears one of the stewards call her name and pretends not to. She can already imagine that The Lady will be chuckling over complaints about her behaviour.

From the slope behind the kennels, the ceremony is only half visible. Bright parasols bob like flowers. She finishes coiling the last of the leads when someone edges up beside her. She doesn't need to look to know who it is— Jonas always moves like he's apologizing to the ground.

"Shouldn't you be inside?" She says, not looking up.

"I w–was," He whispers like he's going to get scolded for speaking too loudly, "S-s-some of Th–the Lady's g–guests wanted w-wine out here. A-and the f–footwomen are already h–half drunk, so…"

"So you thought you'd check the perimeter."

There's a pause. Then, a quiet laugh, "C–c-caught me. M-Most days I-I'll be ta-tasked outside an-anyway…"

Branwen snorts, watching a hound roll luxuriously in a patch of mud that cost someone a fortune to dredge, "You missed the best of it. One of the highborn girls nearly lost a finger trying to show she could leash a hound."

"D–did she?"

"She screamed like she had. I told her she's lucky the dog had manners."

Jonas's smile flickers visibly in the corner of her eye.

Branwen jerks her chin toward the crowd, "Covenant Day, huh. Mud, wine, and bad horsemanship."

A burst of laughter rises nearby. A noblewoman trying to balance on a barrel, cheered on by half a dozen matrons. Standing next to Jonas makes the whole spectacle feel more absurd. Branwen shakes her head, "I guess that's what nobles consider to be piety."

Jonas's shoulders shake with quiet amusement, "Th–they'll have to b–bless the w-whole ya–y-yard after t-this."

"Bless it, scrub it, burn it down and start over."

That earns a chuckle from him, a small one that's caught between his teeth, and she feels a strange warmth at the sound. For a while, they just stand together, sharing the same patch of muddy ground while chaos spills across the rest of the estate. It's not quite raining now, but the drizzle picks up where last night's puddles still cling to hoofprints

A servant runs past with a tray of half-spilled cups; hounds bark in the distance, still restless from the mock hunt. Somewhere, music stumbles through a dance tune, the fiddle strings shrill in the drizzle. Branwen rolls her shoulders, the ache of the day settling into her joints. Jonas, ever the quiet shadow, shifts to stand a little closer, his sleeve brushing hers.

She glances sidelong at him. "Tell me something," She says, "This goddess— Alira, First Binding, all that nonsense. Was that ever a thing where you're from? Or did you stick with the fair folk?"

He thinks about it, biting his lip first, "N–no. N–not really. Th–that was for n-nobles. We h–heard t-t-the names, but… n–never in our h–houses."

"Didn't think so."

"M–my g-grandparents…" Jonas stops and Branwen simply waits for him to continue. He seems to be mulling over a specific memory. He purses his lips, and goes on after a pause, "Left… o-o-offerings. Bread e-ends. Ho—honey if it w-was a g–good year. S-said they'd k–keep the animals sa–s-safe."

Branwen nods once, unsurprised, "That sounds about right."

Jonas hesitates again before adding, his voice now barely above a whisper, "W–wouldn't have b-b-been invited t-to any f–festivals

anyway."

She turns her head toward him, "No?"

"N–nobody w–wanted me t-there. C–couldn't s–say words r–right. I—I t-think… I m–ma–made people u–uncomfortable."

Her brow furrows, "That's ridiculous."

Jonas's mouth twists faintly, neither smile nor grimace. Then, haltingly, he tells her, in broken pieces, about his hometown. About his family. About the other children. About the teasing, the cruel laughter, the bucket of cold water dumped over his head. How one of the girls had asked him to make a boat from birch bark, said she wanted to see if it would float. She wanted to race their boats. He mentions how he'd been thrilled— stupidly, he says— because no one had ever asked him for something like that before. How he'd arrive at the riverbank, bark shaped with careful hands, only to have her and her friends dump a pail of water over him the moment he walked under a footbridge.

Branwen doesn't breathe for a moment. The image, a boy with too much hope, lodges somewhere behind her ribs. She feels heat surge up from her chest, flooding her neck and ears. The girls' laughter echoes in her imagination and something inside her wants to bite, to shove, to make them feel small and mean the way they made him feel.

Jonas glances down at his hands, as though he can still see the strips of birch he'd peeled, the folds of his work, "I th–thought she m–meant i-it. She s–smiled, and I th–thought—"

He stops. The rest doesn't need saying. His eyes dart away, as though he shouldn't have shared anything with her at all, "S–sorry. I sh–

shouldn't—"

"Don't," She cuts in, voice sharp. Branwen isn't proud of interrupting him. It's something she generally tries to avoid doing because gods know he's been interrupted enough to last a lifetime. But *this*— She won't let him retreat into himself, "Don't apologize. You don't ever have to apologize for sharing about what happened to you. It wasn't your fault so don't blame yourself."

Branwen exhales sharply, shoving a damp strand of hair off her forehead.

"Gods. Pigs in clothes, all of them."

"Wh–what?"

"You heard me," Her voice comes low and hot, the kind of anger that doesn't fade easily, "Who does that? Who thinks that's funny? It's just a stutter. What's wrong with people?"

Her words come fast now, nearly a growl, and her jaw tightens so hard it aches. She imagines those girls again and the fury in her belly twists into something deeper, more protective than she means it to be. Jonas stares, startled, and then something softens in his expression. He looks at her in that way where he's clearly thinking of her as something supernatural.

"Idiots," She mutters, and she's including his family in that. Jonas had mentioned his parents and grandparents, and what they did— or really, didn't do— to try to fix his stutter. How he was sent away at twelve. It makes her heart twist. But at the same time, she had seen the love in Jonas's eyes. It— well, she's learned a lot about him unexpectedly, and it's making her twitch and angry and

uncomfortable and *fuck I don't know what to do for him. I want to fix everything for him but I can't.*

He lets out a shaky laugh, not a real laugh, more a cracked, uncertain sound that dies quickly, "Y–you don't h–have to b-be so… a-angry…"

"I *do.* Somebody should've been angry for you a long time ago."

Jonas's mouth opens, then closes again. He doesn't seem to know what to do with that, or with her.

Something inside Branwen squirms, too— because the sight of him, shy and still smiling faintly despite himself, has her chest aching in a way she doesn't want to think about. And before she can stop herself, before sense or dignity can intervene, she blurts out, "I'll make bark boats with you."

He blinks, "Pa—p-pardon?"

She realises what she's said just as the words leave her mouth. Her ears burn, "I mean— if you ever want to. Or something. I'll—" She gestures vaguely toward the distant fields, "We'll send them down the river. Race them."

There's a beat of silence, the kind that feels far too long.

Then Jonas laughs— softly, uncertainly, but this time genuine— the sound curling like warmth through the cool, wet air, "Y–you'd d–do that?"

“Sure,” She mutters, now staring very intently at the mud, “...I don’t even know how to make a bark boat.”

His laughter brightens at that, spilling into a grin she’s not ready for. Her throat feels tight, her palms too warm. It’s almost unbearable how soft he looks. Branwen feels a tug at the corner of her mouth despite herself. Mercifully, Jonas changes the subject.

“Y–you know,” He says, “M g–grandparents had a c–cat. Elsie. S-swore she kept the f–fair folk away. S–spirits c–couldn’t stand her.”

Branwen raises a brow. Yeah, she can see him with a cat. She might be able to get hounds and horses in line, but Jonas would probably be the one to get on the good side of any ornery feline.

Jonas begins to sound a little more confident now that the talk’s turned to familiar things that thankfully isn’t full of misery, “They s–said her p–purring r–rattled the bones of un–unseen things. N–nothing wicked could s–step past her. Sh–she’d hiss, and they’d r-run.”

“Never thought I’d envy a cat.”

“I w–was dis–d-dismayed when I g–got here,” Jonas continues, a touch of playfulness creeping in, “N–no cats in the e–estate. Felt… odd. N–no one to keep w-watch.”

“Guess you’ll have to rely on the hounds,” She says. Frankly, she thought it was odd as well when she first arrived. Most noble houses have cats, sometimes several. Branwen later learned that Lady Merevine apparently coughs and wheezes whenever she’s near them, so The Lady never got any.

He shakes his head, a mischievous spark flickering to life. His smile turns a little sheepish, a little brave, “Y-you’re like a c–cat. Pr–protective. And i-if anyone tr–tries to t–touch what’s y-yours, you’d h–iss and claw.”

She clicks her tongue, trying to smother the warmth creeping up her neck. Branwen has to remind herself to breathe.

“I work with *dogs,* Jonas. Pack animals. Loyal. Trainable. Since when are cats *actually* protective, anyway?”

“Mm. T-that’s w-why it’s… f-f-funny.”

“Oh, is it?” She says dryly, folding her arms, “You really think I’m some prowling barn cat?”

He tilts his head as if considering it. “T-the kind that s–sits on the h–hearth and p-pretends not to l–like anyone. Bu–b-but still keeps w–watch.”

Branwen gives him a look that might be a glare if her mouth weren’t fighting a smile, “Pretends not to like anyone, hm? Didn’t think I’d be seeing Bold Jonas again so soon.”

“M–must be—because of t-the c–company,” Jonas says, pink-faced and clearly quite pleased with himself that he called her a cat. Branwen wonders if he’ll ever stop surprising her.

“Bold,” She repeats, shaking her head. After a pause, she reaches into her coat pocket and produces a small shortbread biscuit. It’s better quality than the usual crumbly ones she gets from the servant’s

kitchens. This one she pilfered from a tray meant for the guests, figuring she'd be playing the typical *spiritual envoy* role. Whether or not Jonas actually still thinks of her that way, despite how he looks at her that makes her feel a little light-headed, she doesn't know; but Branwen had decided some time ago that there isn't any issue in continuing to get him biscuits every now and then.

She takes his hand, turning his palm up. "Here," She presses the biscuit into it, fingers brushing his skin for a moment longer than necessary, "Try using that mouth for chewing instead."

Jonas blinks down at the biscuit, then up at her, "Th–thank you," He murmurs shyly.

"If I'm a cat, I wonder what you would be," She says briskly, stepping back before he can see the softness creeping into her expression. Her hand hangs for a heartbeat at her coat pocket, then drops.

"You'd be…" She studies him as if weighing options, then says, too easily, "—a mouse."

He startles, the biscuit nearly forgotten in his palm, "A m–mouse?" He squeaks like one, voice small and incredulous.

"A mouse," She repeats, narrowing her eyes in mock menace, "Small, quick, always skittering at the edges, too polite to take the front seat. Always on the lookout, but somehow always around. And they *do* occasionally get bold," Her mouth quirks; and for a ridiculous second she lets the teasing turn sharper, "And as a cat," She adds, leaning in a fraction, "I'd— eat you."

The last words nearly choke out of her, sudden and too soft, and she clears her throat like she's swallowed something she shouldn't have.

The words hang there, absurd and dangerous and utterly unserious. Her own throat tightens— she hears how the sentence sounds, how foolish and sharp it is— and she coughs, embarrassed by the sudden rawness of it. She's teased him before but this feels… different. *I'm saying a lot of nonsense lately,* she thinks wryly, *Going to put myself in an early grave because I've lost all sense with him, apparently.*

"E-e-eat me…" He says, voice small and trying for a joke, then trips over the last syllable and gives a nervous little chuckle. His eyes— gods help her— still that glimmer of mischief, "N–not m–most p–people's idea of a b–blessing f-for Co–C-Covenant Day, I th–think."

She waves a hand, trying to hide how hard her heart pounds in her chest, "Well, you're lucky that this big bad cat isn't hungry. You know, mice don't usually get treats," Branwen presses her lips together, then adds, quieter, "But you get one because you haven't run off yet. You stay."

It's meant as a jest, a bit of dry teasing between them. In the earlier days, he would have taken it seriously— Would've ducked his head and muttered an apology, cheeks pink with confusion, thinking she was calling him a pest. Back then, even a sideways look from her might've sent him skittering for the door. Now, though, he just watches her, calm and steady, that faint, uncertain smile playing around his mouth.

She looks away first.

You stay. The words echo, too close to something she doesn't say aloud. Her gaze drifts past him, to the mess of puddles spreading through the trampled yard. The water reflects only sky and movement — carriages, boots, skirts— and for half a second she can almost smell the flood again. The rot of river silt, the cold rising up, the sound of her pa's voice shouting before it was drowned out. Her parents dead,

her sisters scattered in the wind. They're gone, but Jonas is still here.

She blinks, and it's just mud again. Nothing worth remembering.

Her mind flickers back to his words from minutes before. His hometown, how the other boys had mocked him, how the girls had joined in, and how the laughter had worn his family down until they sent him away for peace. The quiet resignation in his voice when he'd said it, as if he still thought it was his fault for being born wrong in the mouth.

And here they are, two runaways of different kinds. One pushed out, one washed out. Both finding some strange shelter in the same estate that doesn't really belong to either of them. A place full of people and yet, they both found themselves largely… alone in all these years.

She realises she's still staring at the puddle, jaw tight. The reflection ripples when someone steps in it, breaking apart the sky.

"Now eat your biscuit before my stomach changes its mind," She mumbles.

"M–ma'am, y–yes, ma'am," Jonas replies, mimicking the exaggerated deference on display by the noblemen mulling around. His own tease loosens whatever tightness had caught in her throat.

The moment lingers as he nibbles on his biscuit, and the two of them watch the preposterous pageantry of Covenant Day for a little while longer until they return to work.

The end of the first day means dirty dishes. Lots of them.

Jonas moves through the drizzle with a stack of plates balanced against his chest. The light rain is fine enough to bead on his lashes but not heavy enough to soak, yet. The grass underfoot squelches with every step. From the fringe of the lawns, the rows of canvas tents bob gently in the wet wind, lanterns flickering like distant stars. Fires glow faintly behind trees, small and steady. Laughter rises sharp from the terraces; the sermons of travelling priestesses echo softened, dulled by drizzle and distance. Jonas keeps to the margins, moving in the puddled grass, invisible to most.

By the makeshift kitchen tents, the wash-tubs are already overflowing, steam mixing with rain. He adds his load to the pile and rubs the ache from his wrists before heading out again. The main courtyard still hums with noise. The mud clings to his boots, dragging with each step, while the distant parasols of guests sway like toys. Flags snap on high poles, and people appear and disappear behind tents, glimpsed only in flashes. The estate gleams beyond the courtyard, a lighthouse of gold and shadow, alive yet untouchable. The “camping” of lower ranked nobles feels more like a traveling fair.

He moves quietly through the rows, collecting goblets and serving trays, keeping his head down. The nobles are half-drunk and tired enough not to notice him.

“The Lady looked radiant this morning,” One woman says, voice sharp with admiration and envy both, “To think, her judgement settles land disputes three provinces wide. Even the Preceptor-General defers to her.”

“She *is* the Dominion’s jewel,” Another replies, “Alira herself must bless her every dawn.”

“Oh, she’s certainly blessed. Have you seen her… gentlemen visitors?”

Jonas keeps walking, but the words stick. He’s heard The Lady spoken of like that before, as though she’s not flesh and bone but something higher. Untouchable. Half of him believes it.

Jonas stops a little ways off, ears catching the cadence of the priestess. The syllables wash over him in soft waves, mingled with the drip of rain and the occasional creak of canvas. He notes the glint of a lantern against her clasped hands, the outline of boots kneeling in damp grass. Details immediate and intimate, yet the sermon’s grandeur is far away.

A group of men kneel by a tent’s opening, heads bowed to a woman in a deep blue cloak, a travelling priestess of the Covenant Circle, judging by her sash. She’s giving a sermon to anyone sober enough to listen. Her voice carries through the drizzle, smooth and trained.

“Remember,” She says, “Alira moulded the first man so the world would know peace. His deference became Her song. His labour, her rest. The *First Binding* was mercy— That women might lead the world away from chaos.”

The words pricking at him. There are other voices murmuring agreement, others still laughing too loudly to care.

“Every Covenant, every washing, every bow and offering,” The priestess continues, “Is a reminder that men exist through the grace of women. To forget this order is to invite ruin. Look to the floods, the fires, the unrest in the colonies— each born from disobedience. All a punishment from Alira.”

The priestess' voice fades behind him as he carries another tray toward the kitchen tents. Her words linger, though, about obedience. He's lived in those words his whole life, been shaped by them. A natural inclination, he supposes. But he also overhears that not all men are *quite* like that.

"Lord Arleth," Someone whispers furtively as he sets down another tray down in the dish pile before heading back out, "Will probably get *his* feet washed, by his wife no less."

A second voice hums with scandalized delight, "Does The Lady truly entertain his behaviour? I'd never let my son be wed to a woman with such thin skin. How has no one properly disciplined him?" A pause, then a ripple of laughter, "Makes the stomach churn!"

Jonas keeps his head down, but he hears it all. He sets down to begin picking up a new set of dishes, flexes his sore fingers, and looks out over the glowing tents and distant torches. The Lady's estate gleams like a lighthouse in the wet dark. Somewhere in all that, Branwen is probably still awake, finishing her duties. His mind wanders to the Laying of the Cloak. He knows the rituals, the way they echo through every house and hall this week. It's a vow of service, devotion, and patience. It's the week when men show their steadiness and their humility.

Jonas shifts his grip on a plate, the edge biting into his palms. Servants aren't expected to take part. Not in the Cloak, not in the washing. He tells himself that every year. But still, he remembers once, years ago, hearing one of the older servants saying, *"Better a cruel mistress than no mistress at all."* Jonas had pretended to not listen, but the words had lodged in him like grit.

Now, he wipes the drizzle from his forehead and thinks— not for the first time— of a certain someone. Branwen, with her rough hands and steady eyes. He wonders if anyone's ever knelt before her. He imagines— *absurdly*— what it would be like to pour water over her

calloused feet, to touch her ankles with care and reverence. The thought burns through him like fire through fog.

And then he thinks of how angry she was on *his* behalf.

“I’ll make a bark boat with you.”

He shakes it off, busying himself with stacking plates.

From one of the tents, a priestess’s voice rises in recitation.

“As the hand serves the hearth,
So the heart must serve its vow.
As the feet carry the keeper,
So shall the keeper carry the blessed.”

A soft murmur of assent follows. Mostly women, though a few male voices echo dutifully behind. Jonas tilts his head, listening as light rain on canvas and tin. The sermons always sound gentler out here, softened by distance and drizzle.

“Those who are unbound may yet be claimed.

Those who serve may yet be sanctified.”

He swallows hard. He wouldn’t really consider himself unbound, but he’s got no feet to wash. No one to really show his… devotion. To be *claimed.* Against all sense, his mind drifts back to Branwen. To her voice, her teasing about treats and cats and mice. He wonders again if she’s somewhere nearby now, maybe looking at the same rain, thinking of nothing in particular.

Or maybe, if he's foolish enough to hope, she's thinking of him too—

"Pssst—"

Jonas freezes. The sound had come from the shrubbery. A shadow shifts in the drizzle, too deliberate, too human. His mind flickers— *the fair folk?* The faint echo of stories begins creeping up. One must not speak directly to the fair folk, for they will snatch you away to a world unseen. The figure steps closer, and in the dim, rain-slick light, Jonas sees the familiar awkward posture, the patched-together noble clothes… Eliam's attempt at looking proper, at fitting in with the estate's order.

His heart drops.

'E-E-Eliam…!" He stammers, nearly dropping the dishes in his hands. When did he get here? *Why* is he here again? The memory of his last appearance crashes into Jonas like a charging bull and he hates how he cannot find any joy in his brother's presence… Only discomfort and confusion, "...Y-You… can't be h-here."

"I am aware of the rules," Eliam says, voice crisp and deliberate. Perhaps it's because they're surrounded by nobles, but his brother speaks with a genteel inflection he carries like a borrowed coat, the one he usually drops when it's just the two of them, "I am here only to check on you." His eyes are bright, certain and unflinching, "After our last… unfortunate encounter, I thought it prudent to ensure you are well. I can't just wait for letters, they take too long."

Jonas blinks, flustered, caught between some vague form of appreciation and hot indignation. He doesn't know what to do with either feeling, "You—Y-you shouldn't—"

“Do not fear for me,” Eliam interrupts gently, stepping closer, hands clasped neatly in front of him as if he were attending a formal dinner rather than hiding in the bushes, “I come only in concern for you. You know as well as I that the world is a perilous one. One cannot be too cautious.”

Jonas opens his mouth, then shuts it. A retort doesn’t leave his lips, no matter how much he wants to tell Eliam that he’s actually *fine.* It may be hard sometimes but he’s managing. Jonas doesn’t *need* him. Eliam ducks away for a moment when someone walks past and Jonas tries desperately to muster up the courage to talk back, but to no avail. He wants to grasp onto that same bravery he managed when he rebuffed Merrill and Fenn. He got into fisticuffs and yet— Eliam is harder to deal with than any punch.

His brother. Eliam, who truly just wants what’s best for him… A brother who is condescending without a hint of the malice Jonas is all too used to. Confronting him feels like navigating a storm he can’t quite command.

Eliam picks a leaf out of his hair when he deems it safe enough to reappear, “Allow me the small consolation of witnessing you being alright myself. Assurance is its own reward,” Eliam says, the unmistakable undertone of patronage threading through each syllable.

Jonas feels his cheeks heating.

“You are… well, I trust? I must ask, Jonas. Are you… in good hands now? No longer entangled with that woman? I do hope you’ve stopped, erm, engaging in favours.”

Jonas blinks, his mind stuttering as quickly as his words usually do.

His stomach knots, hot and twisting, and his hands curl into fists at his sides. The words hang there, weighted with accusation, with the unspoken judgment beneath *“entangled”* and *“favours.”*

Eliam’s previous words, shouted at Branwen, comes to the forefront of his mind.

“Madam! I must protest! You—yes, you—have, I dare say, absconded with my brother’s honour!”

“I… I—I’m… I…” His throat tightens. His pulse drums in his ears. He can feel his cheeks burning, every instinct screaming at him to tell Eliam to shut his mouth, to leave, to trust him, to *see her as she is*. But the words refuse to form. Every syllable he wants to say— a defense of Branwen, a defense of himself— dissolves into an incoherent jumble of stammers and blubbers. He feels ridiculous, helpless, caught like a bird in a net.

“Don’t worry, Jonas. You needn’t be… exploited here any further. Lina’s cousin— finally, at last— has shown interest in being properly introduced to you. Stutter and all! A match, Jonas! Suitable, respectable, advantageous… If she would excuse your stutter and if your virtue isn’t of concern to her, it surely means she will take good care of you… Still, though, I’m sure it would still be prudent in trying to fix your tongue up properly.”

Eliam keeps going, his words striking Jonas like a blow. Everything is blurring around the weight of Eliam’s voice. *A match?* His chest tightens so hard it almost hurts.

He doesn’t want to leave. The thought of it— of packing up, of walking away from the estate, from the routines he’s come to know, from *her*— hits him like a cold wave. Perhaps, when he was younger, he would have jumped at the opportunity. But not now. The kitchens,

the stables, the smell of hay and soap and rain; Branwen's rough laughter when she's trying not to smile… These things have become *home,* though he's never dared say it aloud. The idea of being wed off to some polite stranger, someone who might purse her lips at his stammer and pity him, who'd see him as a project to fix like his brother… It makes his stomach churn.

Anger prickles beneath his skin. Not the kind that flares and fades, but the quiet, choking kind that builds behind the ribs. He wants to say, *I'm not actually unhappy here, not anymore.* He wants to say, *I don't need saving.* He wants to say *her name.* But the words tangle on his tongue, slipping away before he can shape them. Instead, he just stands there, wet and trembling from the light rain dripping from his hair into his eyes, staring at Eliam like he's looking at someone through glass. A helpless, bitter laugh catches in his throat before he can stop it.

Eliam keeps talking and Jonas feels something fray inside him. Because he knows, deep down, no matter how many times he tries to explain, Eliam might never actually see this life as anything but a failure. Never see *her* as anything but a corruption.

And still, Jonas can't bring himself to truly hate him for it. Not entirely.

Jonas forces a thin breath through his nose, his pulse still thrumming. He lifts the stack of dishes in his aching arms, their edges at this point slick from the drizzle, "I— I sh–should take t-these b–back," He finally manages, voice small and strained.

Eliam, oblivious to the tension coiled in every syllable, hums thoughtfully, "Of course, of course. Duty before all." His eyes dart toward the line of tents as a servant's voice cuts through the rain. Someone calls Jonas's name from across the courtyard. The sound makes Eliam flinch; with a furtive look, he ducks back behind the hedge, as if being spotted would undo whatever small rebellion

brought him here.

"Still," He adds from his leafy hiding place, tone light and full of unearned optimism, "A fine time of year, isn't it? Covenant Day and all. Once you're wed, perhaps you'll have your own little celebration someday. We may not be truly genteel, but we can still honour the spirit of it. I'll write to you as usual, of course. Keep you apprised of the inn. Once you're out of here… you'll write back more often, yes?"

Jonas stares down at his muddied boots, throat tightening. *Once you're wed.* The words scrape at him like sandpaper but all he can do is nod mutely. Eliam beams, taking his silence as assent.

"Good lad," His brother says, ever satisfied with his own idea of goodness, and finally drops the fake accent for a moment, "I just had to ensure you're alright. And share the good news of Lina's cousin! I'm set to return to the inn soon, after this week… Lina is probably going to take me over her knee again for coming back here without her permission… Haha… Ha…"

"Oi! Jonas! Stop lollygagging and help with the dishes!" The servant calls again, sharper now.

Jonas turns quickly, clutching the plates tighter, and takes the excuse for what it is— A mercy. He steps away, boots squelching in the wet grass, the camp's lanterns flickering gold against the growing dark. Behind him, Eliam mutters another fond farewell, words lost beneath the now growing patter of rain.

By the time Jonas reaches the next row of tents, the drizzle has thickened to a steady downpour. The rows stretch endlessly, lanterns glinting on wet canvas. Shadows pass between poles and tent flaps; small fires wink behind trees. He moves like a ghost along the edges, unnoticed, carrying his load through the rhythm of rain, the voices of

nobles and priestesses alike dissolving into the patter and mist. Water seeps into his collar, cold and familiar. He doesn't look back. The voices, the laughter, the sermons, they all fade beneath the rain's relentless rhythm.

He keeps moving, disappearing into the sea of tents until the world is nothing but damp canvas and the darkening sky above, and the hollow ache of knowing that what Eliam wants for him is the one thing he can't bear to have.

The fifth day of Covenant Day drags itself through the mud.

Incense that makes Branwen's nose itch clings to the air. Luckily there's no persistent drizzle this time. Just some rain from last night again. Somewhere beyond the kennels, some priestess's voice drones through the courtyard. Yet another sermon about duty and sanctity and the goddess's everlasting covenant. Branwen stops listening halfway through the first verse. Her patience, stretched thinner than a mule's tether, has no room left for holy words. She's spent the morning hauling feed and bedding, brushing down horses that have seen too much noise and too little rest. The nobles' mock hunts have dwindled to half-hearted gallops through the wood, but the animals still come back jumpy and sweat-soaked, their nostrils flaring at every incense burner and hymn.

"Mind the girth strap," She snaps at a young stablehand who flinches under her tone, fumbling with the buckle, "You'll have her rubbed raw if you pull it like that."

"S–sorry, Marshal."

She exhales through her nose, pinching the bridge of it, "Just—watch

your hands.”

The girl nods quickly and scurries off to fetch a currycomb. Branwen rakes a hand through her hair, jaw tight. The sermon outside swells again, carried by the wind:

“As the cloak is laid, so are the hearts bound. The humble will kneel, the pure will be lifted—”

She groans aloud. “Pure, my arse,” She mutters, giving the nearest stall door a shove. The mare flicks an ear, unimpressed.

The past few days have been a blur of noise, mud, and noblewomen pretending to be shepherds of virtue. Branwen can’t decide if she’s more tired of their piety or their perfumes. And through it all, there’s been one absence she can’t quite ignore.

Jonas.

She hasn’t seen him since the first day of this nonsense. Branwen assumed he’s been buried under chores— Covenant Day is murder for the servants— but something about it needles at her. He mentioned he’d been designated mostly for outside work this year, and she has kept an eye out for him. But she hasn’t seen him in between tents, carrying linens and dishes, or serving nobles their fine wine. The thought that he might be ill, or that someone’s been riding him too hard, makes her stomach twist.

She brushes a hand down the mare’s flank, her movements rougher than they should be.

“Probably hiding somewhere quiet,” She mutters to herself, “That’d be a smart move.”

Still, her mind wanders, back to his shy smile, the way he’d called her a cat, the warmth of shortbread in his hand. She catches herself looking toward the rain-dark archway as if expecting him to appear, tray in hand, that same uncertain light in his eyes.

He doesn’t.

The sermon outside reaches its peak. Voices rise in unison, speaking of bonds and blessings and laying down of cloaks. Branwen tunes it out entirely, grabbing a brush and throwing herself into her work. Better the solid, dependable rhythm of brushing, the scent of horse and straw, than thinking too much about the quiet that’s settled in Jonas’s absence.

After a while, she leans against the stall door, muscles aching. The rain patters steadily on the roof. “Five days,” She mutters. “And not a sign of him.” She scowls into the gloom, as if the shadows might answer, “If he’s gone and caught a chill from the rain, I’ll—”

But she doesn’t finish.

Outside, yet another hymn begins, and she snorts, “Perfect. One more day of this nonsense and I’ll start praying for silence.”

Then she thinks— *He’s not mad I called him a mouse, is he?*

The thought lands out of nowhere, stupid as a dropped bucket, and she scowls at herself for even entertaining it. But once it’s there, it

sticks, clinging like burrs to wool. Maybe she'd teased too hard. He'd gone pink and stammered. Fuck, she *had* called him a mouse and threatened to *eat him.* What if he'd taken her seriously? What if he'd gone quiet because she'd embarrassed him? He laughed and smiled and she read that as genuine. Has she really misunderstood him?

I shouldn't have called him a mouse. He opened up to me and I fucked it up….!

She runs a brush through the mare's tail one last time, restless now. Her hands need something to do, her feet need somewhere to go. When the stablehand tries to thank her for helping with the tack, she just waves her off and strides out into the yard.

The courtyard's half-swamped, all puddles and trampled garlands. A few nobles linger under awnings, comparing the state of their boots and their hangovers. From a nearby tent, incense smoke curls like a serpent through the damp air, and someone's plucking at a lyre too softly to hear the tune. Branwen moves through it all, her brow furrowed, gaze flicking over every servant that passes. The nobles' laughter drifts down from the terraces above the churned mud where she treads.

No Jonas. Not at the washing troughs. Not near the temporary makeshift kitchens built up outside. Not trailing behind the matrons with trays or towels.

She clicks her tongue, more at her own nerves than anything else. It's ridiculous. He's a grown man, not a stray hound gone missing. Still, her boots take her toward the outer tents, checking every space she feasibly can.

Halfway there, someone steps into her path, a noblewoman in a cloak so fine it could buy a year's wages. "Ah, Hunting Marshal," The

woman trills, “You must see this— a trinket from the western colonies. Carved bone, traded through the temples of Asera! Imagine —”

“Can’t,” Branwen says flatly, stepping around her.

The woman blinks, “I beg your pardon?”

“Can’t imagine,” Branwen tosses over her shoulder, “Busy.”

And she is. Busy stomping through puddles as she mutters under her breath. *“Mouse,* honestly. Scared him off, didn’t you? Smart, Branwen, very good. Terrify the only one around here who you can hold a proper conversation with.”

Her boots splash through a deeper puddle, water dark as glass. She pauses there, staring at her reflection warped in the ripples— her hair damp with sweat tied in a braid about to become undone, her tired eyes. Behind her, the estate looms large and bright, music leaking faintly from the halls.

She sighs. “He’s fine,” She tells herself, a little too firmly, “Probably hiding in the kitchens. Probably thinks *I’m* the fool.”

Still, she keeps walking. Just in case.

By dusk, she’s bone-tired. Her arms ache from hauling tack and her temper’s worn thin from nobles who can’t tell a hunting hound from a lapdog. The day’s last horse noses at her shoulder as she leads it back through the dim yard. Lanterns swing from the rafters, throwing golden patches over the straw. At least the stables are familiar enough

to soften the sharp edge of her exhaustion.

She rubs the mare's neck, muttering something low and fond, and pushes open the stable door with her shoulder—

—and freezes.

Jonas is climbing down from the loft ladder.

For half a second she just stares, blinking through the low light. His sleeves are rolled, his hair a little mussed, dust motes still clinging to him. Branwen sets her jaw, trying to look as if her pulse hasn't just lurched into her throat. "So that's where you've been," She's attempting a casual drawl but it comes out a little too rapidly, "Could've saved me half a day's pacing if I just remembered that you've taken a liking to the loft."

He looks a little startled when he puts his foot on the ground and she can already hear the confused apology on his tongue.

She lifts a hand. "I'm not angry," Though she's not sure what she *is*. Relieved, mostly. Annoyed at herself for worrying. Something awkward and hot working under her ribs. "Just… haven't seen you for a couple of days. Thought maybe you'd packed up and gone off to join a monastery."

That earns her the faintest smile. He shifts his weight, rubbing at the back of his neck, eyes flicking to the straw underfoot, "N-no, I— I've just b-been… um," He trails off, swallowing.

Branwen tilts her head.

Jonas hesitates. His fingers twitch against the ladder rail, and he gives a small, awkward laugh that dies halfway out, “M–my brother,” He says at last, voice barely above the sound of the horses shifting in their stalls.

“...Your brother?”

He nods once, quick and uneasy, “H-he’s here… I-I think… O–on the g-g-grounds so—s-somewhere. Keeps t–trying to, ah, to c-catch me al-alone.”

His mouth presses tight after that, “S–so when I fi–f-finish my c–chores, I just… I’ve b-been s-s-staying up in t-the loft.” He gestures faintly upward, ashamed, “H–hiding, I su–suppose. It’s n–not right. He just— he m–means well, but—”

Branwen’s first instinct is a flood of relief. So he hadn’t been avoiding *her*. It makes her want to laugh, or groan, or both. But the feeling fades fast when his words fully register.

“Hold on,” She says, straightening, “He’s back? Around the estate?”

Jonas winces, guilt colouring his cheeks, “Y–yes. I–I thought he’d g–gone home a-a-after the first d–day, but I’ve se–seen him, um… l–lurking. D-didn’t want to ca–cause any t-t-trouble.”

“Trouble? You’ve got a stray man circling the property during Covenant Day. He’ll be lucky if he isn’t strung up by the guards when he’s found,” She gives him an incredulous look, “Was your brother always the type to sneak around places he shouldn’t?”

"...N-no… th–t-this is… new…"

"Gods," She mutters, "Your brother's skulking around the hedges, and you've been nesting in the loft like a field mouse."

That earns a tiny, guilty noise from him— half a laugh, half apology— and against her better judgement, she feels the edges of her irritation start to soften. She's almost… *happy* that she can seemingly keep comparing him to mice of all fucking things. Then an idea takes root.

Branwen glances toward the loft ladder, then at him. "Well, if you think he's still trying to catch you alone," Her voice is low but almost — *almost*— amused, "Might as well keep hiding. Get back up there, I'll join you."

A hesitant smile flickers across his mouth, "T-together?"

"Oh, scandalous, isn't it? Hiding in a loft with the likes of me. Imagine what your brother would say."

Jonas predictably colours at that.

"Didn't he already think I was— what was it?— *'indulging a servant lad's loneliness'?"* The corner of her mouth quirks, "Suppose I ought to live up to my reputation."

He makes a small, strangled sound that might be a laugh, though his face is red as embers.

Branwen steps past him and hauls herself up the ladder and onto the loft boards. Dust rises around her boots, soft in the dimming light. She turns and offers him a hand, “If we’re to be scandalous, may as well do it properly.”

Jonas hesitates, eyes darting once to the door, as if Eliam might materialize there, before he takes her hand. His palm is warm and soft. She pulls him up beside her, a little too rapidly, perhaps to hide how that small contact unsettles her more than it should. Below, the horses shift in their stalls; the soft, rhythmic snort of one carries through the quiet. The air smells of hay and rain and something faintly sweet, like old straw drying after a storm.

Branwen sits back against a beam, catching her breath. “Well,” She murmurs, glancing sidelong at him, “Seems we’ve survived the scandal so far.”

He ducks his head, smiling faintly, “Y-yet.”

Something in her chest tightens at that, warm and dangerous. She tells herself it’s just the close air, the long day.

She stretches out her legs, the joints in her knees popping, “Your brother shouldn’t linger here. He’s going to get soaked when the rain picks up again.”

The mirth fades from Jonas’s expression, “I k-know. Like I-I sa-said… H-he means w-well. I th-think. I j-just… d-don’t know what t-to s-say to him a-a-anymore.”

She studies him for a moment, waiting, sensing there’s more behind

that answer. And that's when the air starts to shift— The teasing giving way to something slower, heavier.

"Not saying anything is sometimes the best choice."

Jonas doesn't meet her eyes, now fiddling with a frayed bit of rope. For a long while, there's only the patter of rain beginning and the soft huff of horses below. She can feel him trying to relax, his shoulders finally dropping an inch. He has a scent of soap and damp linen sticking to him— he must've been in the washing yard earlier— and the scent mingles with the hay. It's… comfortable. Too comfortable, maybe.

"Y'know," She hedges, voice dropping softer, "For someone hiding from his brother, you don't look half as miserable as I expected."

He glances at her then, a quick flick of his eyes, uncertain if it's safe to smile wider. Branwen catches it anyway.

"D'you—" Jonas starts, hesitating, "D-do you m-miss yo–yours? F-family, I m-mean."

The question lands like a splinter. She looks away, down toward the stables, where the rain threads through the rafters in silver strands as it gradually starts to become heavier, "That's a question."

He opens his mouth to apologize, but she cuts him off with a hand, "Don't. You apologize too much. It's a fair question. Just… not something I talk about much."

In the lantern glow, droplets slide down the beams. One gathers,

swells, then falling to the floor below. Branwen watches it break. Suddenly, her mind betrays her: She sees water rising— dark, fast— and hands she never saw again. It's not even raining hard. Just a drizzle, soft as breath against the roof. Rain never catches her, only storms. She shouldn't be thinking of memories over something so harmless, and yet, here she is. Her throat tightens. She suppresses a scowl, as if that could shove the memory back down where it belongs.

"You're lucky, you know," She says finally, "Having someone who bothers to chase after you. Even if he's a nuisance."

Jonas tilts his head, brow furrowed, "Y-you r-really th-think so?"

"I do."

He doesn't reply right away. But she can feel his gaze on her, quiet and careful, like he's trying to see what sits behind her words. Branwen exhales through her nose, slow and steady. Something in her loosens, a hinge long rusted. And for the first time in years, she's not sure she can keep it from opening.

He shifts beside her, not quite fidgeting, not quite still, "What d-do you m-mean?" He asks, soft enough the rain almost swallows it.

It's easier to look at the hay than at him.

"I mean—" She stops. The word feels too big for her mouth. "Some people are just… left behind. No one comes chasing after them."

The rain fills the silence, steady and unhurried against the roof. Jonas's breathing is even beside her, quiet but close enough that she

can feel it. An anchor, a small, constant warmth in the dim air.

She swallows once, her jaw tight, “My sisters.”

Jonas turns his head a little, enough to show he’s listening. He doesn’t say anything.

“They left home early,” Branwen goes on, the words dragging like stones over gravel, “Went away for better work, better everything. I called them traitors.” A breath hitches from her chest, the sound is brittle, “Thought they were abandoning us. Abandoning me.”

Her gaze slips to the rafters. A drop gathers, falls, and darkens the hay below.

“Then the flood came. Took the farm. Took… our parents.”

The pause that follows feels endless.

“And I just— left,” She manages, “Didn’t stay. Didn’t help rebuild. Just kept walking until I found somewhere that would keep me fed. Slept in barns, worked fields, moved on.”

Her hand drifts to the grain of the floorboards, thumb tracing the ridges as if the roughness might steady her, “For years, I blamed them. Thought, if they’d cared, they’d have come looking. But I never sent word. Never left a trail, not even a name.” She exhales, a shaky, uneven sound. “I didn’t wait for help. I didn’t even try.”

Her voice thins, “How could they find me when I made myself impossible to find? How could I be angry they never chased me when I never chased them?”

The only answer is the rain and her own uneven breathing.

“I was a coward,” The words trembling before flattening into something hollow, “A bad sister. I left home and now they probably think I drowned with our parents.” Her throat catches, “It’s been years and I— I have no idea where they are.”

Her lips part like she might say more, but no sound comes. The heat rises behind her eyes before she can fight it back. She presses the heel of her hand hard against them, but the first tear still escapes, splattering dark against her sleeve. Another follows. Then another.

She breathes in, shallow and sharp, and lets it out through her teeth. “Damn it,” She mutters.

The rain begins to thicken, a low, persistent hum against the roof. Branwen cranes her head back and stares at the loft floor, watching droplets now slide through the cracks, gathering into tiny rivulets before sinking into the hay. The sound fills her skull, a hollow, drumming ache that won’t stop. She blinks— And she isn’t in the loft anymore. She’s sixteen again, knee-deep in black water, the world turned to ruin. The smell of rot and river mud, the silence where voices should’ve been. Her breath catches sharply, the image searing bright and fast before the dim lamplight of the present snaps back around her.

“The world’s too big now,” She says suddenly, her voice raw and half-choked, “Every paper I read talks about ships setting out for the colonies, or lands so wide you could walk your whole life and never find the edge.” She laughs— if it can be called that— a short, jagged

sound, “And I think— if the world’s that big, how in all hells could we ever find each other?”

The words are tumbling out faster now, “They could be anywhere. Married, dead, rich, starving— I don’t know. I don’t know anything. I just—” Her breath stutters, “I just kept walking.”

The rain grows louder, heavy enough to drown out the small noises of the stable below. She drags her hand down her face, as if she could scrape the heat from her skin, but her tears only smear and keep coming. “I’m babbling,” She mutters, shaking her head, “I don’t even know what I’m saying… Fuck, I haven’t— I haven’t thought about them like this in years.”

Jonas moves then, slow and uncertain but deliberate. He shifts closer, and his hand hovers before settling, lightly, on her forearm. The contact is warm and careful. A wordless question.

Branwen doesn’t flinch. She doesn’t pull away either.

And something inside her continues to pull away and break apart.

Branwen tries to steady her breath, but it breaks in her chest. A sound escapes her— small, strangled, almost childlike— and then another, rougher one follows. Before she can stop it, more tears come in earnest. These are bigger, louder, and she presses the heel of her hand to her mouth, shoulders shaking, but it’s useless. The years she’s spent locking it all away, patching herself over with work and silence, unravel in a matter of seconds. It’s nothing like tears mere moments ago; this is a steady and unrelenting stream she can’t stop despite her meagre efforts.

Jonas’s hand is still on her arm, steady despite how badly she’s

shaking now. He shifts closer, careful not to crowd her, until he's close enough for her to feel the warmth of him through the damp air. He hesitates, his fingers twitch like he's debating whether he has the right, but then he places his other hand gently on her shoulder. Branwen tries to swallow the sound that builds in her throat, but it breaks through anyway— a low, shuddering sob that tears through her chest. She doubles over, elbows on her knees, hair falling into her face as the tears spill faster than she can wipe them away. It's ugly and wet and hurts her throat. Years of held breath finally exhaled.

Her voice comes in gasps between the crying, "I— I should've stayed. Or gone after them. Or— something," Another sob racks her, "They left to make something better, and I— gods, I can't believe I called them traitors," She presses her hands to her eyes, as if she could grind the tears back in, "And then I just— left too. Didn't write, didn't send word, didn't even— even tell anyone where I was going. I didn't even *know* where I was going."

"M-miss B–Branwen," Jonas says softly, her name breaking around the stutter. She could almost smile at how he still bothers to call her *Miss,* despite how miserably she utterly feels, "Y–you d–did what you ha–had to. You—" He swallows, searching for the words, "Y–you l-l-lost ev–everything. Anyone would've—would've l-left."

She shakes her head, tears streaking her cheeks. She wants to repeat what's already been said, how she abandoned them, how she would have sent word, how she's a bad sister— to vocalize a guilt that has slowly been eating her alive. But Jonas speaks before that wall can shatter again.

He squeezes her shoulder, voice low but sure in its tenderness, "S-sometimes you j-just... survive. Th–that's not t-the same as le—leaving."

She lets out a broken laugh, the kind that sounds like it hurts, *"Survive,"* She echoes, bitter and small, "If this is surviving, I don't

think I'm very good at it."

"Y–you're still here. Y–you f–found work. You... you c–*care*. Th–that counts. Even if it d–doesn't feel like it."

Jonas's hands on her arm and shoulder remain as a steadying weight, "Yo-your sisters… T-they w-would've wanted th-that," he says, his stutter catching on every other word, but there's no hesitation behind it now, "For you t–to live. T–to k–keep g–going."

Branwen shakes her head, muttering something thick and broken, words swallowed by the sound of the rain. Jonas's warmth brushes against her like a tether.

"Maybe," He murmurs, after a long silence, "M–maybe they're s–somewhere th–thinking the s–same thing. Th–that they should've… c–chased you."

That undoes her. The sob comes sudden and violent, tearing straight from her chest. She folds forward, shoulders shaking, face blotched and wet. It's the kind that makes her breath hitch and her nose run, the kind she's trained herself never to do. Her hands fall uselessly to her sides, fingers curling as if she could hold herself together that way.

"Th–the world's b–big. But you do-don't have t-to be lo–l-lost in it. You—" The word catches, "Y-you f–found a place. Ma-maybe it's s-small, but it's y–yours."

Branwen's sobs taper to shallow, uneven breaths. Her eyes are red, her face streaked, but she doesn't look away. Jonas stays beside her without speaking. He doesn't reach for more words. He just stays. A solid, certain, and quiet shape in the dim light.

When the last shudder leaves her, she's left hollow and quiet, her breath coming in soft, uneven pulls. The world feels dim and rinsed clean, and she sits in it, heavy-limbed and exhausted, eyes swollen and palms cold. Jonas's touch feels like it's no longer meant to comfort, not exactly, but to remind her she isn't alone. His thumb moves in a gentle, rhythmic circle on her arm. When she finally drags in a shaky breath and rubs her face, he shifts, just enough that their shoulders brush.

For a while, they stay like that, close but quiet, the air filled only by the hum of rain and the faint creak of the wood beneath them. Eventually, Branwen leans back against the wall, eyes half-lidded, and lets out a long exhale.

"I'm sorry," She says softly, though she isn't sure what for.

Jonas shakes his head, "N–no need."

Something eases in her chest at that, small but real. The kind of release that doesn't fix anything but makes the ache a little more bearable. She looks over at him then— at the faint lines of worry around his eyes, at the gentle way he watches her like he's afraid she might shatter again— and manages the smallest, tired smile.

"…Thanks," She mumbles, "For listening to that mess."

Jonas nods and lowers his eyes, and lets the silence settle between them. It's no longer heavy, just quiet.

Outside, the rain begins to lessen, the air sharp and clean. Branwen sits with her knees drawn up, the warmth of Jonas's shoulder still

pressed faintly to hers, and the world doesn't feel quite so big.

Suffice to say, the next morning, Branwen regrets all of it.

Morning comes grey and wet, the air still smelling faintly of rain. The stables are slick with damp, horses shifting in their stalls, steam curling from their flanks. Branwen's head throbs faintly from too little sleep and too much crying, and her throat feels scraped raw. She keeps moving anyway.

She throws herself into the morning chores like a soldier into battle: mucking stalls, hauling feed, brushing coats until the straw sticks to her sleeves. Her movements are sharp, efficient, almost punishing. Every time her mind drifts toward the memory of last night— the warmth of the loft, Jonas's soft voice, her own shaking breath— she grips the pitchfork harder.

Fuck, what had possessed her? She had *wept*. Fully and shamefully, like a child who had scraped her knee. She can still feel the sting around her eyes, the rawness of her throat, the way her face had crumpled while Jonas sat there beside her. He had seen it all. Worse, he had stayed.

Her stomach twists. He had not said anything cruel. He would not. Jonas is not that sort. He had only looked at her with that quiet, unbearable kindness of his, the kind that does not need to speak to make you feel seen. That almost makes it even worse.

She mutters to herself under her breath, "Get it together, woman," and shoves the pitchfork into the straw with unnecessary force.

She is supposed to be the steady one. The practical one. The woman who does not lose her footing. Not the one sobbing into her sleeves like the world has come undone. That is not who she is. That is not who she is *allowed* to be. And Jonas— he had told her about his own losses without shedding a single tear. His voice had trembled, yes, but he had stayed composed. He had been gentle. The woman should be the strong one, the one who carries, not the one being steadied. The thought makes her jaw tighten until it aches.

Outside, the estate hums with the last day of festivities. The smell of roasted nuts and smoke drifts on the damp air. Laughter echoes across the fields. Servants hurry in and out, preparing for the evening's ceremony, the Laying of the Cloak. Branwen keeps her head down, volunteering for every small task that keeps her moving, keeps her out of her own head. She does not avoid Jonas, not exactly. They're both busy. But when she spots him across the yard, helping with deliveries, sleeves rolled to his elbows, she feels her stomach clench. He glances up once, perhaps catching her eye, and she quickly busies herself with the harness strap she has been pretending to inspect for the past minute.

The irony is not lost on her.

It's not that she thinks he'd judge her. He's too gentle, too… Jonas. But that gentleness unsettles her now. She doesn't know how to stand in front of him and pretend that last night did not happen, that he had not seen her come apart like that. Hours later, her hands are raw, her clothes streaked with dirt, and still her mind will not quiet. Every scrape of the shovel and every clatter of a pail feels like an argument with herself: *You should be over it. You should be stronger than this.*

When someone calls her name from across the yard, she flinches before realizing it is only one of the stablehands asking for help with the mare's bridle. She answers too quickly and stalks off toward the paddock. The clouds begin to break. Thin threads of light push through the grey, and the grounds glisten from the rain. Branwen wipes her hands on her trousers and tells herself she feels better for keeping busy, though her arms are trembling with exhaustion.

After helping the stablehand, she skulks back to her own corner of the yard. There's a quiet moment as she leans on the fence, catching her breath. The light's weak, but it makes everything slick and bright—the puddles, the grass, the roofs of the kennels. She stares at it, but her mind drifts somewhere else. To her sisters.

She imagines them, older now, hair different, maybe with families of their own. The guilt presses down again, hard and sudden. Maybe they read the same kind of newspapers she does. Maybe they saw her name, if her name was ever printed anywhere because of her proximity to The Lady, and just didn't recognize it. Or maybe they've stopped looking altogether. Maybe they never looked.

She exhales slowly, rough through her teeth. *The world is too wide,* she thinks again, and she's done too fine a job at being unfindable.

Another stablehand calls to her, jolting her back to the present. Branwen pushes off the fence and goes back to work, but the ache lingers. That small, familiar voice whispering that she ought to have tried harder, that she's no better now than the frightened girl who kept walking.

A priestess's voice carries faintly from somewhere among the tents when she gets back to the stables.

"Blessed are the Women who stand tall. For they were the first to rise from the earth, and the earth made men to kneel before them."

Branwen makes a face at that, "Nonsense," she mutters as she adjusts the strap on a feed sack.

A quiet chuckle answers her.

She stiffens. Just the sound of his voice sends a flicker through her chest. Something too sharp and raw. She doesn't turn right away, focusing instead on the leather strap in her hands. "Jonas," Her voice comes out steady, at least, "Afternoon."

When she does glance at him, the gentleness in his expression makes her throat feel dry so she looks away when he greets her back, "Af-afternoon."

Branwen gives the strap she's holding a sharp tug, inspecting the buckle though it needs no such inspection, "There's plenty of work to keep you occupied, if you're looking for something to do."

There's a pause. She can feel him watching her, unsure whether to step closer. The silence stretches until she can't stand it.

"I j-just—wanted t-to see if yo-you were a-alright," He says quietly.

That stops her. Branwen exhales through her nose, "I'm fine."

Jonas doesn't move. She can feel his gaze lingering. It's gentle and insistent, bordering on unbearable.

"Y-you d-don't have t-to be," He murmurs after a pause, "F-fine, I m-mean."

Branwen's jaw ticks. She turns her back to him, continuing to fuss

with a saddle strap that doesn't need fixing. Jonas steps closer, slow enough she can hear the soft scuff of his boots, "Th-there isn't—there isn't a-a-anything wr-wrong about c-crying."

Her fingers still. "Jonas," She warns, voice low.

He doesn't stop, "Did it… h-help?"

The question is so earnest that she can't even muster her usual gruffness. She lets out a long breath and begrudgingly accepts that yes, it did help alleviate a weight she didn't know she had been carrying this whole time, "...It did."

She looks back at him and he nods, small and satisfied, as though she's confirmed something he already knew.

"Th—t-then there's n-nothing to be as-ashamed of."

"...I see Bold Jonas is out in full force today."

For a moment she thinks he'll back off, which, hypocritically, Branwen knows she doesn't want. The comfort unsettles her as much as it soothes. Her throat feels tight, her skin prickling as though every nerve is waking up at once. Jonas doesn't move away, though. He only stands there, hands twitching slightly as if he's weighing something in his mind. Then, slowly, as though afraid the air itself might shatter, he spreads his arms a little.

"D-do you w-want a hug?"

The words hang there between them, ridiculous and earnest in equal measure.

Branwen blinks. A laugh almost escapes her, more out of nerves than humour. Everything seems to still. He looks so uncertain, standing there with his arms half-raised, face pink, shoulders slightly hunched as if bracing for rejection. The sight nearly undoes her. The last person who had ever offered to hold her like that had been her parents, years ago. Since then, she's built her life on not needing that kind of closeness. On being solid enough to stand on her own.

Her pulse kicks, hard and confusing.

It would be so easy to say yes. Too easy.

Branwen forces out a shaky laugh and reaches for the nearest rag, tossing it at his chest to break the tension, "Now you're making fun of me."

He catches it clumsily, and shakes his head with a small grin, "N-no. I'd w-wouldn't da-dare…"

"Oh, hush," She says, but she's smiling now too, against her will, "You're a terrible liar." The warmth of it feels strange in her throat, though the skin prickling remains. But now, it doesn't feel so bad. Emotions, being confusing and unhelpful again.

Jonas rubs the back of his neck, looking flustered yet pleased, "Y-you lo-looked like you c-could u-use it."

"I'll survive."

“I kn-know.”

She turns back to her work, hoping the flush in her cheeks doesn’t show. Jonas lowers the rag, still smiling in that soft, guileless way that always seems to slip past her defences. There’s no mockery there. Just patience. Just him. And something in her, traitorous and tired, aches at the sight of it.

But he doesn’t leave.

From the corner of her eye, she catches him fumbling in his pocket. The movement is small and nervous.

“I— I b-brought you s-something.”

She turns back at him, brows furrowed, “Gods, Jonas, how many times are you going to catch me off guard?”

He pulls out a small bundle: a bit of twine tied around a sprig of yarrow and a smooth river pebble, notched faintly like a crescent moon. The sort of thing a child might make and tuck under a pillow.

“…What’s this?”

He rubs the back of his neck again, eyes darting away, “A—ah—t-talisman. M-my gra-grandparents used t-to m-make them. F-for protection. From bad d-dreams. From… b-being followed.”

“You made this?”

He nods, “I—I thought— a-after last n-night— maybe i-it’d… h-help.”

She stares at him, slack-jaw, no words coming out. The absurdity of it, this charm of twine and weeds, and the tenderness behind it, are so hopelessly tangled that her heart skips a beat.

“I don’t need protecting,” She manages finally, trying to sound tough but failing miserably, “Never have.”

“I kn-know. B-but… ma-maybe it’ll k-keep the r-rain away.”

Branwen studies the small, hopeful thing in his hands. His thumb brushes the twine as if it’s precious. She sighs, long and quiet, and reaches out and takes it. Her rough fingers brushes his. “You’re ridiculous,” She mutters, but her voice betrays her. It’s low, warm, and unwilling to let go.

He smiles, a little crooked thing that lights his face, “Y-yes.”

Branwen looks away quickly, tucking the talisman into her pocket, “Well. I’ll… keep it by the door. Maybe it’ll keep those fair folk away from that *Shadow Crossing* you’re always avoiding.”

“G-good. Th-they’re t-tricky sorts.”

“Right. Now that that’s settled it’s… time to get back to work.”

It's meant as a dismissal, but neither of them move. The air between them hums faintly with all the things neither has words for. Jonas lingers a heartbeat longer, watching her with that quiet, patient fondness that feels both impossible and perfectly natural. Then he nods once and slips away.

When he's gone, Branwen touches the charm through the fabric of her pocket. It's nothing. Just a piece of string, really. Yet it steadies her in some strange, aching way. Not faith. Just the knowing that someone thought of her, and meant her well, and how it's not the first time Jonas has done a little gesture like this.

That, somehow, feels holy enough.

As the sun slowly sets, the estate hums with an odd, reverent energy. Women in their best shawls move between the tents, coats trailing mud; the men— husbands, sons, servants— shuffle about with bowls and linens, nervous and damp, waiting for dusk. A light rain drifts in and out, more mist than storm, softening the edges of everything. Branwen can hear the low drone of sermons echoing from somewhere near the east garden, a visiting priestess reciting from *The Reclaiming,* if she remembers the titles of these dumb stories properly:

"And She bent not to serve, nor bowed Her head, for man was the earth beneath Her heel; from dust he came, and to dust he returns, grateful to be shaped by Her tread."

The crowd murmurs their amens. Branwen rolls her eyes and keeps moving. She's seen men trip over themselves for this *"devotional humility"* before, seen them elbowing for the best place in the mud, whispering about who they'll kneel to. It's all ceremony and no

substance, she thinks. If the gods cared for the humble, the Freeholds wouldn't be so fragile.

She cuts through the servant tents to check on the stablehands and spots Maud near the laundry basin, being pursued by two boys carrying pitchers.

"Piss off, both of you!" Maud snaps, whirling around with her apron, "I've scrubbed my own feet since before your mothers were born! Servants aren't even meant to participate!"

The boys retreat, red-faced and laughing. Branwen smirks despite herself.

It's almost comforting, this chaos. The rain, the sermons, the nonsense of it all. It's like with the *Genteel Standard*… It's all noise dressed up as meaning. She reminds herself to keep her head down, get through the night, and not think about anything that hurts. Then she catches sight of Jonas across the yard. He's standing apart from the others, coat darkened by rain, hair curling damp against his temples. His hands hang at his sides. For a moment, he looks almost lost.

His eyes lift once, scanning the crowd, and find hers. The same quiet warmth from the morning's charm stirs somewhere deep in her chest, steady as a pulse. He immediately begins making his way towards her. The sudden lack of his usual hesitation gives her pause.

The drizzle thickens as they stand near one another under a tarp. The noble tents flutter weakly in the wind, laughter and the clink of bowls spilling out from inside. The priestess's voice carries faintly over it all, an unbroken chant.

"Rain's not letting up," She mutters as a greeting.

“N-no,” he replies softly. His voice sounds smaller than usual, tired around the edges.

They stand together, watching the slow procession taking shape near the main tents. Men and boys alike kneel in the mud, cloaks spread beneath them, hands trembling as they pour water over the feet of older women. The women murmur blessings in return, some solemn, some indulgent. They’re surrounded by lanterns and candles.

“And so She set him beneath Her foot, that he might remember from whom he drew breath. For a man’s purpose is devotion, and a Woman’s, divine stewardship.”

Branwen snorts, “Whole week of feasts and mock hunts, all to end with a washing. A bit of mud and suddenly everyone’s holy. All this display for feet cleaning but it’s the boots that’re dirty.”

Jonas’s mouth tugs faintly, but his eyes don’t leave the scene, “S-s’pose it m-m-means so-something to t-them.”

“Sure. Means blisters and laundry to me.”

Another chant rolls across the courtyard, something about obedience as grace, about how the humble find purpose in serving. Jonas’s shoulders tighten almost imperceptibly at that. Branwen notices.

He swallows, then speaks so low she nearly misses it, “I’ve n-never w-washed anyone’s fe-feet.”

Her head turns sharply toward him. There's no self-pity in the admission, just a quiet ache she can't fathom.

He glances down, "S'pose n-no one's ever—" He stops, then starts again, "No one's e-e-ever asked m-me to."

The words hang between them. Branwen feels them, heavy and strange. She doesn't know what to do with the feeling.

"Oh," She says finally, thin and graceless, "Well. Seems a waste of water anyhow."

Jonas's mouth lifts faintly, but it doesn't reach his eyes. His gaze lingers on the kneeling men, on the slow, deliberate touch of water against skin. There's something faraway in him, and Branwen can't read it.

She clears her throat, "Seen your brother yet?" Because she doesn't know what else to say to break whatever tension has befallen them.

Jonas's eyes flicker. He shakes his head too quickly, "N-no. Still ha-haven't seen h-him."

"Good. Guess he finally went back home."

Something passes over his face then, brief and unreadable. Like he's hearing something only he can hear. Branwen studies him a moment longer and frowns.

“You look like you’ve swallowed something sour. Did your brother say something to you?”

He startles a bit, then forces a small and uneven smile, “J-just… th-thinking.”

“Don’t,” She replies dryly, “You’ll ruin the night.”

Another voice rises over the drizzle, clear and solemn. It’s a verse that has been on repeat these past couple of days.

“Those who are unbound may yet be claimed.

Those who serve may yet be sanctified.”

Then, after a pause.

“To kneel is to love rightly.”

“Sanctified, my arse,” Branwen flicks mud from her boot, “All that kneeling just ruins your trousers. Everyone is going to get a cold from all this bloody rain, anyway.”

Jonas doesn’t laugh this time. His eyes are still fixed on the procession, on the motion of hands and water and surrender. She studies him. His soaked hair, his tired face, that faraway look again. Something twists, the feeling uncomfortably tender. He had sat with her when she’d broken down. Made her that little talisman. And now he stands here, rain clinging to his lashes, watching other men kneel

like it means something sacred.

There's an undeniable desire in there she doesn't understand. But maybe it's not for her to understand. Men can be an odd sort.

So, she asks, "Do you… want to?"

He blinks, startled, "W-want t-to?"

"It's daft, I know," She says a little too quickly, "All this talk about mud and divinity… This just feels like a humiliation ritual. But... Jonas, by all means, tell me I'm misreading you but, uh… The way you're looking at them," She awkwardly nods toward the ceremony, "Do you… Do you want to do it? Least I can do is let you have your little ritual."

She can't quite outwardly ask *'do you want to wash my feet?'* because Branwen thinks she might actually die if she did so, but the meaning comes across nonetheless.

Jonas goes still, like she's stoked a sudden fire in him. His breath catches, lips parting as if words have abandoned him. "I—" He starts, then stops, eyes darting from her boots to the mud to her face, "I d-don't kn-know if it's—if I—"

She waits, uneasy now that she's said it aloud. The rain hisses softly on the tarp above, a curtain between them and the rest of the world.

Finally, he manages, "It's n-not the c-ceremony. No-not the w-worship," His voice trembles but he presses on, as if forcing the words through something thick in his throat, "It's n-not… ab-about Al-

Alira…”

“Then what?”

He falters, “It’s just—” He shakes his head helplessly, “S-something about i-it. The c-caring for s-someone. The t-touch. Th-the…” He purses his lips togethers, his hands twisting faintly at his sides, “The g-giving.”

Branwen watches him, her brow furrowed. He looks so utterly earnest she can’t even tease him for it. His voice is small but steady now.

“I kn-know it’s fo-foolish. B-but when I s-see them, I just— I w-want to understand wh-what it f-f-feels like.”

Her throat feels tight, though she doesn’t know why. There’s something in the way he says *want* that makes her feel warm, “…You’re a strange one,” She says finally, trying for lightness and failing halfway.

“I kn-know,” He answers, almost smiling.

“Well… if it matters that much to you, come by the stables later.”

His eyes lift sharply, surprise flickering there.

“I’ve got spare water and clean rags. Can’t promise much else.”

He nods slowly, almost reverently, “A-alright.”

“Don’t make it weird,” She halfheartedly warns.

Jonas’s mouth twitches. A small smile.

When he leaves, the rain seems louder. Branwen stands under the tarp a long while after, heart thudding in a rhythm she doesn’t want to name.

The last echoes of the Covenant hymns are still drifting through the damp air when Branwen leaves the courtyard. The lanterns are guttering low, half-drowned in smoke and drizzle, and the scent of tallow and wet grass hangs thick over the stones. Down by the stables and kennels, the noise of the festival has dulled to a murmur— a scattered handful of nobles laughing too loudly, boots scuffing over the yard, the faint wail of some instrument played by those too deep in their cups to care that the day’s supposed to be over.

Tomorrow, most of them will be gone. The wagons will creak down the lane before sunrise, banners coming down one by one, the fine silk tents stripped of their glory and bundled for the next province’s celebration. But tonight, the estate still hums faintly with what’s left of it.

For servants, the ending never really comes at all.

Branwen walks the familiar path to the stables, the packed earth soft beneath her boots. Her back still aches from the morning’s work, and her head’s full of half-formed thoughts; of the ritualized humility, the

bowed figures, the rhythmic wash of water over feet. She can't quite shake the sight of it: men kneeling, women standing, candles flickering against their faces like some strange, holy fire.

Still, she can't help wondering what it must have looked like inside the main house. The Lady and her children wouldn't be out in the rain, after all, despite getting dirty being part of the entire point. No doubt they were in the upper parlour, fire crackling, candles in their polished holders, a priestess leading them through some grander version of it all. Velvet cushions. Bowls of perfumed water. Linen instead of burlap. A small orchestra instead of rain.

Branwen imagines it for a moment: The noble sons kneeling on rugs, heads bent, hands trembling just the same as the stablehands'. The thought makes her snort softly to herself. Maybe some things don't change no matter how much polish you add.

The stables are dim and quiet when she pushes through the door. One of the older mares flicks her tail, ears twitching toward her. A few stalls down, a foal stamps and whickers softly in its sleep. The air is warm and full of the sharp, grounding scent of hay and horse; solid things that make sense to her in a way no gilded ritual ever will.

She pulls off her gloves, flexing her hands to get the stiffness out. The candle she lights throws long shadows up the beams. There's still work to be done before dawn— tack to check, feed to set out— but she leans against a post for a moment, letting the quiet settle… Though it doesn't last long. The door creaks, and she doesn't have to turn to know who it is.

Jonas slips in, pausing at the threshold to do his little *Shadow Crossing* ritual. Her gaze flicks over to him, and she doesn't miss how his lips twitch upwards when he notices that she hung his talisman up by the doorframe. He's holding something bundled in a cloth. He carries it carefully as if it were a wounded lamb.

She gives him a long look. There's nothing mocking in her tone, but it still sounds like she's testing the air between them when she says, "You really came all the way down here to wash my feet."

Jonas's throat bobs, "If—if you'll le-let m-me."

"I know I'm the one that asked but… Damn, you're serious about this?"

Jonas doesn't move closer, just stands there by the doorway like he's waiting for her to send him away. He just nods and now Branwen feels like she's kicked a puppy.

"Don't just stand there," She grunts, "Come on, before someone wanders in and thinks I've started some new barnyard religion."

He startles at that, a faint, nervous smile flickering.

She leads him toward the loft ladder, the boards creaking under her boots. "Up there," She says over her shoulder, "More private. Don't need a stablehand walking in on us." Ah, more scandal. She wryly thinks that his brother would have an aneurysm at the sight of them.

Branwen climbs first. By the time Jonas joins her, she's already cleared a patch of floor, setting down the candle on an upturned bucket. The light is dim and golden, throwing their shadows wide against the beams. Jonas kneels automatically to unbundle the cloth, revealing a small bowl, a rag, a flask of water. All borrowed, by the look of it. He handles each piece with the same kind of care he gives to fine tack, or to her injured hound all that time ago.

Branwen crosses her arms, trying to look unimpressed and not… whatever this is, “I said I got water and clean rags but you went ahead and got stuff from the house anyway. You really came prepared, huh,” She says, half to herself.

Jonas glances up, the faintest flush on his cheeks, “I d-didn’t w-want to d-do it p-poorly.”

That earns a small huff of laughter from her, “You think there’s a right and wrong way to wash feet?”

He shrugs, eyes dropping back to the bowl, “M-maybe just… a ge-gentle one.”

Something about that— *a gentle one*— makes her feel a little dizzy. She swallows, her voice rougher than before, “…Alright, then.”

She sits on a low stool, tugging at the laces of her boots, “Let’s see what all this piety’s about.”

He stays still for a moment, as if bracing himself, and then pours some water into the bowl. The soft splash is ordinary and intimate at once. Branwen sticks her feet out, toes flexing slightly. Of course, it’s her boots that are truly dirty though she briefly thinks that since she’s been walking around all that she probably stinks. There are small blisters on the back of her ankles and every instinct in her muscles is tense with anticipation.

Branwen looks away and crosses her arms, pretending to study the shadows on the rafters. She doesn’t understand this at all— why he wants it, why she’s letting him— but there’s a strange peace in the act

of not questioning it.

When his hands find her ankle, careful and warm, she nearly flinches from the tenderness of it. She looks back at him a little too quickly. The candlelight dances over his flushed face, over the way his brows draw together in concentration. He lowers her feet slowly, reverently, dipping them into the water with careful precision. His movements are careful, almost ceremonious, and she can feel the intensity of his focus radiating like a tangible heat.

Her lips press into a thin line, partly to keep herself from laughing, partly because her chest tightens in a way she doesn't entirely understand. He's red, embarrassed, so aware of the closeness, and yet so deliberate. Every small motion of his hands, every tilt of his head as he concentrates, makes her pulse quicken. She wants to look away again and can't.

"G–Gently," He stammers, voice trembling slightly with effort and nerves, "I… I w–won't h–hurt…"

She snorts softly, a little self-deprecating laugh, though the warmth spreading in her chest is undeniable, "You'd never hurt me," She murmurs, voice quieter, almost a whisper, letting herself linger in the moment, "Just… do your thing, Jonas."

I've touched his bare arse, she thinks suddenly, *I can get through some feet washing, surely.*

…So why does this feel more… intimate?

Jonas's hands moving carefully, washing her feet as though performing a ritual sacred in some forgotten temple, reverent and trembling all at once. She notices how he pauses, glances up at her

briefly, and then buries himself in the task again, cheeks burning the whole time. Every careful motion sends a quiet bolt of something she can't name straight through her.

She balances on the edge of her patience, wanting to tease, wanting to snark at the absurdity of the situation, but also… wanting to sink into the sheer intensity of his focus, the delicate care he's giving her feet, the way he kneels, completely vulnerable and utterly devoted in his own awkward, stuttering way. The stable, the scent of hay and horse, the dim lantern light— all of it fades around her. There's just him, kneeling, blushing, and her, aware of how much she… actually *wants* to be part of this tiny, reverent place he's creating with every careful, hesitant gesture.

Jonas shifts forward on his knees, the rough floorboards of the loft creaking under his slight weight. The lantern glow brushes over the crown of his chestnut-brown hair with the motion, catching on the uneven strands as he leans closer. His head is bowed, eyes fixed on the work of his hands. Those big, earnest eyes that look almost too soft for the sharp, draughty world they live in. He's not broad or strong; he's all elbows and long fingers, narrow shoulders under a plain, slightly rumpled shirt. Not pretty in the way nobles are. Not even handsome in the way a man might sometimes grow into himself.

And yet— somehow, like this— he's the most attractive man she's ever seen. That damn illustration from the medical tome threatens to form in her mind before she replaces the image in her imagination with literally anything else.

There's something about the quiet gravity of him, the way he's kneeling in front of her now without a hint of his usual self-conscious posing, the way he handles her feet like they're the most important thing in the world. His hands cradle her heels, rinse the arches, the pads of his thumbs sweeping away the day's dust with a care that makes her stomach feel odd. She can hear his breathing, steady and careful, see the faint flutter of his lashes when he looks up briefly, only to drop his gaze again.

Her throat feels tight, as though she's on the verge of saying something she wouldn't be able to take back. She doesn't know what to do with herself. Her arms stay crossed because if they uncross, she's not entirely sure where they'd go. Touch his hair? His cheek? *No. Gods, no.*

After what feels like an eternity, Jonas finishes with slow deliberation. He dries her feet with the corner of his cloak like it's the softest linen in the land. His hands linger a fraction of a second longer than they need to before he finally sits back on his heels, gaze still down.

She clears her throat, because she has to say something before the silence swallows her whole, "...This is the dumbest ritual I've ever seen."

It's a weak defence, but it's the only thing standing between her and the sharp, disorienting truth that's threatening to bloom deep inside her.

"Th-th… thank y-you," Jonas says, and she can see the faint flush climbing his neck, "F-for… for l-letting me… d-do this."

"It's just feet," Branwen's reply is barely a murmur.

He lifts his gaze then, tentative but steady, "S-still… means… a l-lot."

That does her in. Something shifts in her chest, like a knot being pulled too tight. Her thoughts scatter in a dozen directions, none of them safe. She doesn't know what to do with herself, so she does nothing… Just sits there, pretending she's not coming apart at the seams. It's ridiculous how fast her pulse kicks up. She's suddenly

aware of the closeness, the smell of him, soap and stable dust, and the fact that he's still just kneeling right there, looking up at her like she's the one with the power to decide what happens next.

She can't take the way he looks at her. Branwen clears her throat and grasps onto anything for a lifeline, "You shouldn't be the only one giving something," She blurts out. Sure, she *technically* gave this to him since she's the one that offered but still— He comforted her, made her a talisman, and now washed her damn feet. It just feels… unbalanced, almost. She should give him something, both to dispel the unbearable tension and to make things feel a *little* bit more equal.

"…Stay here, I'll be back in a second," She says, fumbling to put her boots back on before descending the ladder. Branwen digs in her memory, reaching for something, anything, from home. Not the Covenant Day nonsense, not the formalities she's had to learn here, but something that's hers. A gesture, a token… The Freeholds didn't have much in the way of ceremony. What they had was patched together from whatever could survive bad seasons, floods, and the whims of weather. Still, there was a thing…

She remembers it only in pieces. The details blur together, small and shabby in her mind's eye. Her Mam bending low in the dim light of their house, pressing a thumb to Pa's forehead in a crooked line, murmuring words that Branwen was too young to understand. A scrap of bread wrapped in a kerchief. A rough-woven cord tied round the wrist for luck.

Branwen glances around the tack wall until her fingers find a spare length of red leather cord, the kind she uses to tie back her own hair when the wind picks up. It's nothing— frayed at the ends, softened by use— but it's what she's got.

She takes it, then climbs back up the loft ladder. For a second her shadow swallows him where he's kneeling— *why is he still kneeling?!*— and her stupid heart does a little somersault at the sight of him. Jonas

doesn't move, only looks up at her with those wide, almost startled eyes, like a deer that hasn't yet decided whether to bolt or stay put. His gaze flicks to her hands, then back to her face, as if silently asking permission for whatever she's about to do.

"I… don't really remember it all," She mumbles, as if that will soften the edges of the embarrassment already prickling under her skin, "Give me your hand."

When he does, she catches herself staring at the damn thing. Bony and fine, pale from too much indoor work, the tendons standing out under thin skin. His wrist is so narrow she thinks she can nearly touch her thumb to forefinger around it without pulling tight.

"You're all joints and no meat," She mutters, trying for dry humour to hide the strange pull in her chest, "This'll just slip off if you're not careful."

Her fingers brush his pulse when she ties the cord around his wrist. She thinks suddenly of The Tethering back in the Freeholds, of the three braided cords tattooed on one's back when she begins bleeding. They're an awful lot of knots back home. She hasn't really thought of what she's tied together, either metaphorically or literally, in years. The thought presses sharp for a moment, then dulls beneath the sound of his breath.

It's not a fancy knot, just something snug enough to hold, but the touch lingers longer than it should. She can feel his warmth through the cord, the steady beat beneath her fingertips. When she's done, she hesitates, thumb still resting against the inside of his wrist. "…For luck," She says, quieter than she means to, as if speaking any louder might make it sound foolish, "Freehold version of a talisman, I guess."

Part of her wants to say she doesn't believe in it, that all these rituals and talismans and charms and whatever else are all nonsense. That maybe she's remembering wrong anyway, and that cord doesn't actually mean anything, not really. But Jonas stares at the cord like she's just fastened a golden chain around him. His mouth parts slightly, but he doesn't say anything, and his expression… Fuck. It's soft in a way she doesn't have words for. Reverent, almost. His eyes, chestnut in the lamplight, have a sheen to them that makes her want to look away and keep looking all at once.

The sight knocks the wind out of her in some small, ridiculous way. Her heartbeat gives an unsteady lurch, and she has to pull her hand back before she does something stupid, like brush his hair out of his face or, worse, find out what that expression would feel like if it were any closer.

Jonas looks down at the cord again, thumb rubbing lightly over the knot like he's testing its shape. When he finally speaks, it comes out halting, but not from shyness, more like he's trying to line up the words before they tumble loose.

"Th-thank you," He says, and then the smile comes. Something small and unguarded, so plain in its sincerity it feels almost indecent to look at, "I… I'll k-keep it s-safe. I—" His voice catches, and his eyes dart away before sliding back up to hers, "It's… it's r-red. Y-you know wh-what they say ab-about red?"

Branwen arches a brow and folds her arms, because that's safer than whatever's clawing its way up her throat. She kicks it down, before muttering, "I'm sure you're about to tell me."

"M-my… m-mother had a d-dress, red as… a-as autumn l-leaves. My g-grandmother cut a piece f-from it when I wa-was a boy. S-said red cloth… c-could keep sp–sp-spirits from t-twisting your dreams, or f-following you b-between do-doorways," His gaze drops back to the cord around his wrist, and he says it softer, "K-keeps a b-boy's heart

from g-going crooked in the night."

Branwen blinks, her mouth opening just enough to start a reply, though none comes. The image is so vivid— Some warm hearth far from here, his grandparents passing down old country wards, a little boy clutching a scrap of cloth like it's a shield— that it lands in her with a weight she can't name.

"You… still believe that?" She asks, aiming for sceptical but hearing the rasp in her own voice.

Jonas's smile twitches, faint but certain, "I—I keep a p-piece of it… under my p-pillow. Be-been there s-since I was s-small. So… y-yes. I b-believe it."

And there it is again. That warm, steadfast look, as though this silly little cord she pulled has joined some sacred league in his mind. It's ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. Yet something about the way he cradles his wrist, about the weight he's given her small gesture, makes her pulse feel heavy in her throat. She just grunts, trying to disguise the way her pulse has picked up again.

She looks away first, muttering something that sounds like, "Well… good. Then it'll do its job," But she can still feel the echo of his smile, and it's going to follow her whether she wants it to or not.

Jonas keeps looking at the cord like he's memorising it, his thumb still tracing the knot. Then, almost absently, as though it's simply the truth and not something that might wreck her composure, he says, "I-It's… im-important to me. B-but… y-you are too."

Branwen makes a sound, something between a choke and a cough, that feels like she's just swallowed down the wrong way. Her breath

catches sharp in her chest, and for a stupid second she's convinced she must've heard him wrong.

But Jonas is still watching her, head tilted slightly, brow drawn in that faint crease he gets when he's nervous but determined to be honest. His eyes— too big for his thin face, deep chestnut framed by lashes that really have no business belonging to a scrawny man— don't waver. There's no blush this time, no awkward laugh. Just that quiet, steady sincerity that makes her feel like he's put something breakable right into her hands and trusts her not to drop it.

She can't handle it. Not now. Not with his damned hair falling into his eyes like that, and his mouth curved in that almost-smile like he's just relieved to have said it out loud.

"Alright," She cuts in, "That's enough out of you. Time for bed. It's gonna be a long week of cleaning up this festival circus."

She turns before he can answer, but the image of him sitting there… Slight and kneeling, the red cord bright against his wrist, and those earnest eyes following her burns stubbornly in her mind, making her feel far more unsteady than she'd like to admit.

When he's gone, the stable seems to exhale around her. The candle up in the loft burns low, the air thick with hay and the faint trace of him. Branwen meanders to the door and touches the talisman without meaning to, the twine rough against her fingers, and she wonders what sort of fool starts believing in luck just because someone else already does.

The path to the main house gleams faintly with puddles, catching what little light's left from the lanterns. Jonas walks slow, careful not

to slip on the stones. His sleeves are still damp from where the water splashed, but he doesn't mind it. Every few steps, his fingers find the red cord at his wrist, tracing it like a prayer.

He can still feel the weight of foot in his palms, the solid warmth of her skin touching his. The way she sat when he washed her feet, steady and *almost* unflinching, a shape cut against the candlelight. Her hair had come loose in places, one braid slipping forward over her shoulder. She hadn't even noticed. She never seems to, and that's what makes her so impossible.

It had been meant as a gesture. Something simple and reverent. But there'd been a moment, when he'd looked up and met her eyes, where something inside him had gone very still. Not fear. Not shame either. Something quieter. As if all the noise of the world had hushed just long enough for him to breathe the same air as her, and mean it.

Jonas presses the cord again, thumb finding the knot.

He might not have seen Eliam these past few days, accepting that his brother had indeed left… But his words hadn't.

"Lina's cousin— finally, at last— has shown interest in being properly introduced to you. Stutter and all! A match, Jonas! Suitable, respectable, advantageous… If she would excuse your stutter and if your virtue isn't of concern to her, it surely means she will take good care of you…"

Jonas had heard them all day in the back of his mind. He had done his work for the day, picking up dishes and dirty rags, watched bowed heads on the sidelines, half-listened to the various sermons that surrounded him. All he could think was that he wanted this— this kneeling, this quiet devotion— but not for any woman his brother chooses.

He'd wanted it for Branwen.

Not in the way Eliam would understand. Not the way the *Genteel Standard* might talk about male desire and wanting. What lived in him wasn't lust, not exactly. It was the wanting to *serve,* to be near her steadiness, her blunt kindness, to be of use. To be known and still kept under her hand. He'd never had words for that, and maybe there weren't any. But when she'd let him touch her feet, when she'd allowed that small and strange act, it had felt like finding something truer than prayer.

The rain begins again, soft against the eaves. Jonas lifts his face toward it.

He doesn't know what will happen now that Covenant Day is over, or when Eliam writes again. But he knows one thing, clear as breath in the cold: He doesn't want to leave.

He wants to stay where she is.

The first light of dawn spills across the courtyard when Branwen finally stirs. Pale orange, thin as watered paint, the kind that softens edges instead of sharpening them. She blinks against it, shoulders stiff from sleeping in her clothes, from the straw pressing into her back. Somewhere outside, a rooster calls too early and too sure of himself.

Jonas sits nearby, already awake and has probably done plenty of chores in the main house. The sunlight catches on his hair and turns it gold at the edges, like he's been dusted with warmth. He looks holy,

in that quiet, accidental way of his. Not because of any goddess, but because of what she feels looking at him. Because of what he makes her remember: that small, invisible ache she used to carry, the one that told her she didn't belong anywhere.

She watches him fuss with a cracked cup, eyes down, careful as always. And something inside her steadies.

The candle from the night before has burned down to a puddle of wax, the faint scent of smoke clinging to the air. They haven't said much since the washing. She'd expected to feel foolish about it come morning— to regret the whole strange, soft thing like she had with crying—but she doesn't. Not quite. There's a quiet in her she hasn't felt in years, and it's not unpleasant.

She clears her throat, "I meant what I said, you know."

Jonas looks up. There's a bit of straw clinging to his sleeve, "A-about wh-what?"

"About the bark boats. We should make some."

He blinks once, then again, like he's not sure he's heard right.

"There's plenty of birch by the stream. When we have time we should go there."

When he doesn't immediately answer she wonders if she's made it sound like a joke. Then his voice comes, small and steady.

“Al-alright.”

Something flickers at the sound of it. Relief, maybe. Branwen isn’t so sure. She looks at the open door instead of him, and her mind wanders. Sometimes, and especially when she first came to the estate, she’d stand in the west paddock and thought the world didn’t care if she vanished. That she could disappear into the dirt and the sky wouldn’t notice. It had come after reading yet another scrap of politics in The Lady’s paper. Something about new uprisings near the coast, about marriage contracts to unify foreign territories. All above her paygrade, all talked about with careless ease in drawing rooms that smelled of citrus soap and old money. But it had gutted her, somehow. A creeping ache behind her ribs.

She’d tried to name it once, that feeling. That vast, nauseating sense of being too small in a world that had gotten too large, too fast. A world where her Freehold village was just a smudge no cartographer bothered to ink. A world where her parents had died and no one really noticed. Where she could disappear and only a few dogs might miss her.

But now, as the light pools over Jonas’s shoulders, she knows that’s changed.

The world still doesn’t care. But he does. And that’s enough.

She breathes out slowly. Lets the sound of morning fill the space between them. The birds in the loft waking, the soft shuffle of hooves and paws.

“You should rest more, you know.”

He glances at her, that same tentative smile tugging at his mouth, “C-

can’t. Th-there’s a l-lot to cl-clean.”

Branwen hums, low in her throat, half a sigh, “You and your bloody chores. Still got enough time to sit with me, though.”

He chuckles softly at that.

She’s smiling too, faintly. The kind of smile that feels like a secret she’s not quite ready to share. And as the day stretches open before them, she finds herself wishing, just for a second, that the sun would stay caught like this. Half-risen, gentle, not yet asking them to move.

Her mind drifts, unbidden, to her sisters. She doesn’t know where they are now. Sometimes she tells herself they’re fine, that Hesta and Meinwen can take care of themselves. Other times, the guilt hits sharp and mean: that she never went looking, that she chose to leave instead of rebuild. That maybe they think she’s dead.

And even if she did find them somehow, would they even recognize each other anymore?

It’s an old wound, usually dulled by work and weather, but here, in the stillness beside Jonas, it presses up again. Maybe that’s part of why his company feels like safety. Not because he fills the silence, but because he doesn’t demand to fix it. He just… exists alongside her, steady as breath.

She doesn’t know when it happened. Not exactly. Maybe it was the day she saw him leave the stables, a half-eaten shortbread in his hand like it was a talisman. Or maybe it was when she threatened to let the hounds piss on Lord Theddes’ boots and saw the way Jonas’s mouth parted, not in fear, but in something close to awe. Or maybe it was the time she realized he tried to bake for her three times.

But somewhere in all that mess, something settled.

And she realized it wasn't just pity, or protectiveness, or the strange tenderness she felt when she saw his narrow shoulders stiffen around nobles. It was something else. Something rooted. Steady.

When she looks at Jonas now she doesn't quite feel like the world is swallowing her anymore.

She feels like she's found her place.

Her place was beside him.

Just… *with.*

And it terrifies her.

Because feelings like that? They're luxuries too. Like comfort. Like warmth. Like rest. And she'd taught herself not to believe in those things.

But still. There it was. A stubborn, quiet truth blooming somewhere in her chest like a weed breaking through stone:

Wherever he is… that's where I'm supposed to be.

That’s where I want to be.

Chapter End Notes

They're in LOVE your honour!!! The power of feet washing made them realize it at the same time!!! Jonas wants to be her submissive so badly!!!

This chapter is too long lmao. I wasn't sure if I really encapsulated the whole outsider's perspective of Covenant Day but if I don't get that in 70 pages then I guess I never will. Should I have written them doing more work? Idk man it's 20k words already. Maud, I promise they're not always standing around talking. They're good employees, really!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The guest chambers are still and cold when Jonas slips inside with his cleaning tray.

It has been weeks since Covenant Day, and though the estate has settled into its quieter rhythm, the air still feels heavy with what remains of celebration. Now the Gala is the next event coming soon, or so the upper servants say, though thankfully it isn't held here. It's somewhere away from the estate, somewhere supposedly even grander. Jonas has never seen it, only heard whispers as he works—An orchestra, a gleaming ballroom, and women in silks fine enough to catch the light like water. The sort of place men like him never go.

The chamber he is set to tidy is one of the finest in the house. Pale morning light presses through high arched windows, catching on the gilded cornices and the long, sweeping folds of damask curtains. The air is cool and faintly perfumed with lavender, the scent the upper maids use when turning down noble beds. The hearth has gone out in the night, leaving behind a little mound of pale ash that Jonas will have to sweep up.

Jonas pauses at the threshold, tray balanced in his hands. Even after years in service, rooms like this make him slow his breath. The bedposts gleam with carved vines, the floor is carpeted in rich green wool, and above the mantel hangs a painting of Lady Alis herself in her naval coat, gaze turned toward an unseen horizon.

He sets the tray down and begins to work. First the basin, then the desk, then opening the shutters. Each hinge gives a soft sigh as he opens it, and weak autumn light spills into the room, silvery and cold.

Outside, the courtyard stones are darkened from last night's drizzle. A few servants cross below with armloads of linen or coal, their voices rising faintly through the damp air.

"…heard they dance till dawn, all in glass shoes and silk gloves."

"Glass shoes? Don't be daft. They say it's held on the coast this year, at some admiral's estate. Wouldn't it be too slippery for glass shoes?"

"Nobles have done stranger things. And The Lady's daughter'll be there, uniform and all. Imagine her marching through a ballroom in glass slippers."

"She'll be leading the first dance, I bet. You think her husband knows how to keep up?"

Their laughter drifts up, quick and fleeting as the steam from the laundry carts. Jonas pauses, watching their heads bob along the path until they vanish beneath the colonnade.

Lord Harland— Lady Alis's husband— has been staying here three nights now, waiting for the Gala where his wife will meet him. Her work keeps her at the coast, the talk goes, measuring tides and giving orders to dockhands. The Lady insists her son-in-law be treated with every courtesy while he stays, which means the room must always look newly arranged every morning, as though no one has breathed in it.

Jonas wipes down the dressing table. The mirror catches his eye first. Its surface is flecked with faint traces of a recent shave, stray hairs clinging to the gilded edge and a smear of soap across the basin below. Unsurprising, as a bare jaw marks refinement. Beards are unseemly. Jonas's own skin prickles at the thought of having one. He

supposes he's been fortunate that he's never had much talent in growing facial hair, but he still takes the dull edge of a knife to his chin when Maud reminds him to look "presentable."

At the other end of the table lies a letter, half-sealed, the wax still waiting for a press. The top line is written in a precise, feminine hand. *My Love,* it begins. That's all he sees before turning away, embarrassed by the glimpse. Jonas smooths the cloth along the edge of the desk, careful not to disturb the paper. He's done it enough times to move without thinking, though the motions help steady his thoughts.

The words cling to him. *My Love.* What would it be like, he wonders, to open a letter that begins that way? To have someone think of him with that sort of softness?

Eliam's letters are always neat, firm strokes, full of advice and underlined words of encouragement. Jonas hasn't checked his mail cubby in some time. He tells himself it's because of the long days, or the way the corridors echo at night when the post is sorted. But truthfully, he dreads finding another envelope in his brother's hand. Pages full of cures for his stutter, suggestions for marriage, reminders of what a proper man should be.

Eliam only wants him safe, respectable, married and mended. But the kindness sits heavy. It's like being pressed into a mould that doesn't fit — A small, rounded shape with no edges left of his own.

Jonas wipes a stray hair from the mirror frame, eyes catching on his reflection. Lady Alis's husband's razor gleams faintly in its tray. *Respectable,* Eliam would call it. *Proper.* The word tastes flat in his mouth.

He studies the line of his jaw, the faint nick where he'd cut himself the last time he shaved, the way his collar sits just a little crooked no

matter how carefully he irons it. A servant's face, a servant's hands. Good enough to be trusted with rooms like this, but never meant to belong in them.

Jonas looks away.

Done with the table, he folds the bedsheets before straightening the garments left for pressing. The jacket's embroidery catches the light. Lady Alis's regiment insignia is stitched over Lord Harland's family's crest, the design having been replaced upon his marriage, much like how he would have also changed his last name to Amaranthe. A faint cologne hangs in the air, mixed with the smell of the lavender and starch. At the bedside is a small portrait resting against a silver clock. Lady Alis is painted in miniature but not in uniform this time, but in softer tones, her hair unbound and her smile faint but fond. It's nothing like the formal portrait above the mantel. This one is gentler, intimate, a glimpse of her offered only to her husband. Jonas pauses, uncertain why it makes his chest tighten.

As he dusts the clock, his thoughts shift toward Branwen. The image of her room drifts up again, rough-edged and real in contrast to all this polish. He's only been inside once, some time ago before Covenant Day, when he'd seen she was hunched over from pain and decided to bring her a cup of something warm later that night. The air there had smelled of hay and damp wool, the walls bare except for a pegboard. It wasn't a lady's space, but it was hers, every inch of it. Something practical and spare.

He remembers how she was still under some blankets, how the light from a nearby candle had pooled against the packed-earth floor. He'd barely stayed long enough to set the cup by a small table beside her cot, yet that small moment has stuck with him. He wonders now if she'd let him tidy the place for her. Fold her blankets neatly, oil her boots, mend the tear in her sleeve he once noticed, bring in an old kettle and brazier so he can make her tea more conveniently. Maybe sweep out the corners she never quite gets to and wipe down the windowsill.

Not because she can't, but because he'd like to.

Jonas feels around the red cord she put around his wrist during Covenant Day. A warmth settles comfortably in his chest.

It's a ridiculous thought, he knows. She'd probably teasingly scold him for even trying. But the image stays with him anyway: Her coming in from the rain to a room already warm and tidied, her jacket hung, the lantern trimmed, the air scented faintly with tea. He'd be there to fix her some supper, too. The idea makes something tighten and soften in him at once, a quiet ache that feels too tender to look at directly.

He hadn't known what ailed her then— still doesn't, not really— but he's noticed the pattern. Every month or so, she moves slower, jaw set tight, shoulders stiff as though fighting through invisible blows. It must be that time again.

He folds the cloth over his hand and gives the table one last pass, though there's hardly any dust left. Maybe he'll bring her another drink later. It seemed to help before.

The thought warms him for a moment, small and private, until the bell sounds from down the hall. Jonas startles, sets the cloth aside, and straightens his vest. It's Lord Harland's bell coming from one of the drawing rooms. Duty calls again.

He takes one last glance at the mirror before leaving. The reflection of a clean room, a half-sealed love letter, and a servant vanishing quietly through the door.

The air carries the sharp bite of autumn.

Branwen stands in the field behind the kennels, boots sunk deep in the churned mud and her coat collar turned up against the wind. A line of hounds waits along the fence, tails twitching, breath steaming in the chill air. The Lady wants them ready for the Gala, all polished and good for show. Not for scentwork or the chase, but for parading before silk-clad guests. Tricks and spectacle. Branwen thinks the whole idea foolish, but orders are orders.

She presses two fingers to her lips and lets out a sharp whistle. A brindled hound bounds forward, ears up and eyes bright.

“Sit,” Branwen says, steady and low. The dog drops neatly onto its haunches, tail thumping, “Stay.”

Another whistle, shorter this time, and a pair of younger dogs trot to her side, one slightly limping, the other distracted by a loose bit of hay. Branwen clicks her tongue and reaches down, guiding the limping one with a firm hand. “You’re not performers,” She mutters under her breath, “You’re hunters. Remember that.”

Some of these dogs probably won’t come back. They’ll be sold to people who probably don’t know the first thing about hunting hounds.

Behind her, a group of stablehands leans against the fence rail, brushing down the older dogs and swapping gossip to pass the time. They’ll be the ones keeping an eye on the dogs at the Gala, since Branwen has managed to weasel her way out of that responsibility by telling The Lady she’d suck all the fun out of the room. Their laughter drifts across the yard.

“A Gala,” One says, dragging the word out and rolling her eyes, “Because washing each other’s feet wasn’t enough spectacle.”

“Don’t forget the dance,” Another chimes in, tugging her braid loose from her collar, “I heard the Lady’s bringing in a musician from the capital. Some fancy sort that charges more than we make in a month.”

“Imagine that. Spinning around in lace while we’re hauling feed.”

Branwen lifts her head at that, “Best hope none of you are asked to dance. You’d flatten your partner before the first turn.”

That gets them laughing harder, the sound bright against the wind. Branwen shakes her head and whistles again, giving a low note followed by two quick bursts. The hounds rise and follow, tails wagging in unison as she leads them through a slow turn. A command, a whistle, a gesture of her hand— It’s all rhythm, the same as working the field after rain, muscle and patience.

When she stops, she does her usual count of the stablehands. One, two, three— Then frowns. Brenna and Esther are missing. They’ve been gone since the last water break, nearly half an hour now. Her brow creases. She had told them that she’ll assign them to the horses after the break, but she also specified that the two girls need to see her first before heading to the stables. It’s unlike Brenna to go anywhere without her say, though Esther’s been skittish all week.

She loops the leads over the fence post and scans the far edge of the yard where the barn roofs gleam pale under the thin sun. *Probably ducked inside to gossip or warm their hands,* she tells herself, but the irritation still pricks, especially when dull pain flickers in her abdomen. A reminder of her monthly bleeding. She always did get slightly more snappish when the cramps began.

She gives one last whistle. A note of warning more than command and the dogs quiet instantly. Branwen glances once more toward the barns, the wind tugging at her coat. Then, to the stablehands, she says, “Keep them steady,” She jerks her chin toward the line of hounds, “Run them through the sitting drill again. I’ll be back in a minute.”

The women exchange glances but nod, one already reaching for the lead ropes. Branwen gives a short whistle to settle the dogs again, then starts toward the barns.

The path between fields is slick, and her boots make a soft sucking sound in the mud. A crow calls from the fencepost ahead, its wings flicking dark against the pale sky. The drizzle from the night before has left everything smelling of damp wood and manure. It doesn’t take long before she hears it, a low murmur of voices carried on the wind, quick and nervous. Not the sound of work. She slows, steps quieter, and rounds the corner of the nearest barn. The noises are clearer now: Someone whispering, another stifling a grunt of pain.

Branwen frowns.

“Brenna?” She calls, voice roughened by the chill, “Esther?”

The whispering cuts off. A rustle of hay, a scuffle of boots. Branwen sets her jaw and pushes open the half-door, the hinge creaking loud in the stillness. The smell hits first— pungent iron and something a little sour, sharp and wet.

Branwen’s first instinct is to bark— *“What in the hells are you two doing off shift”*— but the words catch in her throat when she sees them.

Brenna's sitting half in the straw, trousers down to her knees, her face pale and tight. Blood streaks the inside of her thighs, glistening against the hay. Esther's crouched beside her, eyes wide as a startled doe, a rag clutched in both hands and a bucket of water gone pink at the rim.

Branwen steps forward fast, boots sinking into the straw, "Gods, Brenna— what happened?"

Esther looks up, lips pursed together, "She took redfen."

Branwen blinks, "Redfen? In the middle of the workday?"

Brenna manages a tired smile before shrugging, "...Didn't think it'd come on so fast. Brewed it strong. Esther said the tincture smelt off, but I took it anyway."

Redfen. Branwen knows the name. It's the sharp-smelling plant that grows in the ditches by the kennels, its root used for purging the womb of unwanted pregnancies. The healers sell it dried and powdered for a few coins. Most women know how to steep it themselves. It's as common as fever tea. A safe enough thing when used properly, though the rush of it can make you sweat and see stars.

Every estate in the Dominion keeps a patch of redfen somewhere on its grounds, tended quietly by the midwives and older servants. It's a woman's herb, older than scripture, older than The Lady's line itself. Mothers teach their daughters the right ratios by smell alone, and the recipe changes with every province. In some households it's mixed with ground willow bark for softness, in others with honey to mask the bitterness. It's common sense, really, to keep something that can assist with regulating the womb close to home. A body that bleeds should have a say in when and how it does.

Branwen exhales through her nose, a long, tired sound, “How far along?”

“Barely. Just cramps, mostly,” Brenna grunts out, “...Blood makes it look worse.”

“All right. You’ll need broth and rest. And don’t drink water cold; it’ll seize your belly worse.”

Brenna nods weakly.

“Gods,” Branwen mutters, ignoring her own cramps, “Every year it’s the same. Someone takes redfen too strong, someone else forgets their teas altogether.”

There’s no scorn in her voice, just irritation at the timing. If Brenna had come to her and said something, she’d have given the girl the morning off. No one thinks twice about redfen. It’s spoken of as plainly as firewood or feed.

Men, when they do think of it, tend to go quiet. A few will mutter questions they don’t really want answered, or pass along something half-heard from a wife or sister. The rest just look uneasy, as if the very mention might make them bleed by accident. Branwen supposes it’s not their fault. Some things simply aren’t meant for them to understand. The business of the womb belongs to those who bear it, and any noise men make around it is treated like wind under a door: Heard, then forgotten.

Branwen gives Brenna the side-eye, “Still. You took it during work hours?”

The younger woman gives a weak laugh that breaks into a hiss.

Branwen narrows her eyes, doing quick math in her head, “You didn’t happen to—” She grimaces, “—find a warm bed on Covenant Day, did you?”

Esther’s mouth twitches, the ghost of a smirk. Brenna covers her face with her arm.

“That a yes, then,” Branwen says flatly, “Next time you celebrate, mind your timing. And go see the physician if the bleeding doesn’t ease by nightfall. I don’t want you fainting in the yard. That’ll be a pain in the arse I don’t need.”

Branwen crouches beside them with a sigh, taking the rag from Esther’s trembling hands. “You’re using it cold,” She mutters, dipping it back into the bucket and wringing it out, “No wonder she’s shivering,” She presses the cloth gently against Brenna’s thigh, working with brisk, practiced movements.

Esther hovers nearby, “Should I fetch more water?”

“Do that,” Branwen replies, “And a clean blanket from the tack room. Not the good one, she’ll only bleed through it.”

Brenna gives a breathless laugh, half-pained, half-amused, “So much sympathy, boss.”

“You want coddling, go to a nursery. Hold still.”

She works in silence for a moment, the quiet broken only by the drip of water from the rag. Then, more casually than the question deserves, “Who was it, then?”

Brenna stiffens slightly, “Does it matter?”

“It does if I have to explain to Maud why you’re doubled over instead of training the hounds,” Branwen says, “Rules against fraternization apply to us the same way it applies to the housestaff.”

Brenna shakes her head, wincing, “Not one of ours. A visiting servant. From Lady Montrelle’s estate, I think. He was—” She cuts herself off with a smile, “—well enough, I suppose. Thought he was clever with his ‘precautions,’ but clearly not clever enough.”

Branwen raises an eyebrow, “So the sheath split, then?”

“Or slipped. Who knows. Didn’t much feel like checking in the moment.”

Branwen makes a low and unimpressed sound, “If you don’t want to deal with cramps, then you should make sure your twist of gut-lining isn’t going to tear or slip when you’re busy fucking each other. Better yet, make sure the man takes some greytwine so he’s impotent for the night.”

Big words coming from someone who has never bedded anyone. Branwen keeps that fact to herself, keeping face and tone stern and slightly annoyed. She feels a slow coiling ache in her belly. All her experience and knowledge has come with helping other stablehands with abortions over the years. She hadn’t quite anticipated *that* being part

of her job when she started working here.

Brenna chuckles weakly, which fades quickly as another cramp takes her. Esther returns with a folded blanket and more water, her eyes darting between them.

“Here,” Branwen says, helping drape the blanket over Brenna’s lap, “Rest till the pain eases. If you start seeing spots, you’re going to the physician whether you like it or not, regardless if you stop bleeding. If you find yourself needing redfen again, do it on a rest day. Or at least after feeding the hounds. I’m not running drills short-handed because someone’s lover couldn’t tie a knot around his cock properly.”

Brenna manages a faint, grateful smile, “You really do have a way with comfort.”

“I save tenderness for the animals,” Branwen says, standing, “They don’t argue back.”

As Brenna is cleaned up, the odour of blood is gradually replaced by a lingering scent of redfen that still hangs faint in the air. Something sharp and rooty, like nettle. Branwen remembers it vaguely from her village, her ma hanging bunches over the stove to dry, the red-veined leaves curling tight in the heat and pestles of riverstone grinding roots with quiet murmurs. Ordinary work, like grinding oats or salting meat. She’d never needed it herself.

Brenna shifts under the blanket, “I swear, the pain’s worse this time. Maybe the root was old.”

“Maybe you brewed it like moonshine,” Branwen says, wiping her hands on a rag, “Let it steep slow. Same result, less chance of collapsing mid-yard.”

“You make it sound like you’ve used it plenty.”

“I’ve never had to.”

Esther, hovering by the door, perks up, “Really? You know so much about it. I feel like everyone uses it at least once.”

“So you’ve never used redfen?” Brenna asks incredulously, face still pale and sweaty, “What, just luck?”

Branwen huffs, shaking her head, “Luck has nothing to do with it. I’ve —” Her jaw ticks as the lie plays on her tongue, “I just make use of the men in the brothels. They’re professionals, using greytwine or proper sheaths. No fuss, no mess.”

That earns a snort from Brenna.

“Must be nice getting paid enough to be able to hire a *professional.”*

“Time your bedtime dalliances properly so it doesn’t affect your work and maybe you’ll eventually get paid enough to get those same professionals,” Branwen waves them off, “Esther, keep an eye on her. When Brenna’s got colour on her cheeks again the two of you can go to the stables and start brushing the horses for the Gala.”

As she trudges back to the field, she feels a sudden sharp pain in her lower abdomen. Branwen hisses, having foolishly hoped that her monthly bleeding wouldn’t be as much as a nuisance this time. Every month she hopes for ease, and every month she gets none of it. She

rolls her shoulders with a huff, trying to ease the ache low in her back. The pain sits heavy, like a hand pressing down from the inside. She's used to it but now it decides to grind against her patience, especially when she gets back to the hounds.

Everything feels close to the surface. The dogs' panting, the rasp of rope through her gloves when takes hold of the leads, even the wind tugging at her collar— All of it suddenly sharper, louder, nearer than it should be.

She whistles to the hounds and grunts out commands to the stablehands still out in the field. Her mind meanders back to Brenna's pale face and the matter-of-fact talk of beds and sheaths. Of the way Brenna's tone softened when she said *he was well enough.* Branwen snorts under her breath. Well enough, huh.

She's never thought much of coupling, but lately her body betrays her with strange warmth. A restlessness that has nothing to do with labour. The thought of hands or a low voice sticks to her like dust. She catches herself imagining what Jonas's breath might sound like, close enough to feel. The thought lands in her gut, hot and unwelcome.

…*Ridiculous.* He's a servant, and she's technically his superior. Worse, she's the one who just lectured her girls about fraternization and precaution while her own heart refuses her logic.

And yet she keeps thinking of Jonas.

She knows that she— *feels* a lot of big feelings regarding him.

She knows she wants to be with him.

She wonders what it would be like to simply hold him in her arms.

But she's not quite sure how to deal with that.

Branwen rubs at her temple and mutters something foul, directing it at no one. The dogs glance up, puzzled, tails twitching. She whistles and makes them do a stupid little twirl they'll be doing ad nauseam at the Gala. Their ears perk, paws scrabbling over damp earth, oblivious to the noise inside her head.

She's not naïve about sex. She's kissed before. She knows how her fingers feel down there. And the brothels in town stand plain as day along the square, red curtains drawn tight and perfumed smoke leaking from windows. Years ago, after she had gone in one accidentally, there were nights where she'd even thought about going back in, if only to get the matter over with. To be done with curiosity, the way one might finally fix a broken latch that's been catching all winter. But the impulse always cooled before she reached the door.

She figured she simply had no interest in it. That, for whatever reason, her body had been wired differently from everyone else who seems to find great enjoyment in the act. But now—

Branwen wants to experience it.

She wants to know how it feels.

Because she's found someone she'd like to experience it with.

She doesn't want it with a stranger. Branwen wants it with *him*.

And godsdammit, *yes,* she wants that fucking hug.

The realization catches in her chest. She stands very still for a moment, the wind tugging at her hair, the dogs circling her boots. She feels the heat returning stubbornly. The image of Jonas again— That softness in his eyes when he looks at her. The thought makes her jaw clench. He's not meant for *that.* He's too gentle, surely, to have her hands all over him like that. Too kind. She wouldn't ruin that for a moment's foolishness.

But she still can't stop the thought.

What if I did?

What if she did take him? What if she let herself forget the rules, the class, the expectations— all of it— and simply reached for what she wanted? What if she let herself taste that gentleness instead of just watching it from across the yard?

Her hands tighten around the leash, knuckles whitening. The hounds whine, tugging forward, mistaking her tension for command. Branwen breathes out sharply through her nose and steadies them with a curt sound.

She thinks of the last evening they'd shared quiet company. The way his shoulder brushed hers, the soft scrape of his breath when he laughed. That tiny, fragile warmth she felt in her chest, the same one that's been haunting her since. And she remembers how she'd told herself to ignore it, to bury it like all the other soft things that never survived long in her life. How she's been trying to squash that simmering heat for weeks now.

She's come to begrudgingly realize that she's well and truly fucked.

But still, Jonas makes her want softness again.

He makes her want comfort. Rest. Even joy.

She glances toward the manor, where the faint clang of a bell carries across the yard. Somewhere inside, he'll be moving through corridors with his tray and his careful steps, doing his work just as she's doing hers. The thought of him there, going about his quiet duties, fills her with a sudden, unbearable tenderness. It rises like a tide, pressing up into her throat. Her body aches. Not just with the dull, familiar pain that coils low each month, but with something else. Something deeper, heavier and alive. She presses a palm to her belly as if she could will it still, but all it does is make her more aware of the warmth beneath her skin.

It's foolishness. Dangerous foolishness. But she can't help herself.

She wants him. In the way that means bare skin, and heat, and the quiet that follows after.

The dogs bark, snapping her out of it. She whistles them to order, her face set back to its usual hard calm. She cannot afford thoughts like these. Not today. Not ever, if she has any sense. She straightens, jaw set. Best to walk it off.

But as she walks the line of the field, the idea lingers like a coal under ash.

If he ever looked at her that way, if he ever reached back, she knows

that she would not stop him.

“Come on,” She tells the dogs, voice brisk again, “Walk.”

They do so, obedient and eager, while Branwen leads them on— her body mostly steady, her mind far less so.

Jonas balances the cleaning tray against his hip as he makes his way down the corridor, the soft clink of glass and metal rising with each step. The polish drying on the bannisters leaves the hall smelling of lemon oil. Pale light spills through the tall windows, silvering the walls and pooling on the floor.

He pauses at one of the panes, drawn by a flicker of motion below.

The parterre lies beneath him like a map: flowerbeds in sharp, symmetrical shapes— diamonds, spirals, crosses— edged with clipped boxwood and pale gravel paths. Even this late in the season, there’s colour everywhere. Purples and golds tangled together, asters bowed under their own weight, dahlias nodding like sleepy sentries. The air must smell of wet earth and the faint spice of rot, he thinks, where the flowers are starting to turn. It’s not somewhere he’s allowed to tread through generally. He’s not part of the garden staff and servant pathways are hidden, so that housestaff do not disturb the look of the flowers and hedging.

But moving through that riot of colour— Branwen.

She walks between the beds with the hounds circling her, sleek and bright against the faded blooms. The leashes swing loose in her hand;

the dogs weave around her legs in practised arcs. One of them bounds into a bed of wilted marigolds, sending up a spray of petals, and she snaps her fingers sharply. The dog drops back in line at once.

Jonas can't help but smile. A Hunting Marshal and hounds in a formal garden of delicate flowers. Even from a distance he can see the strength in her stance, the ease with which she commands the hounds. For a moment she seems part of the garden's design, its rough and living centre amid all that cultivated order, like one of the marble statues that dot the parterre.

He sets the tray down carefully on the sill and lifts a hand to wave, eager and unthinking.

Branwen glances up at the movement. For a beat, her eyes meet his through the glass.

Jonas's grin broadens, a small and delighted thing, but Branwen's expression doesn't quite match it. There's a flicker of something unreadable there. Tension, maybe, or distraction. She gives a quick, awkward lift of her hand in reply, the motion stiff and formal, before turning her face away. Her jaw is tight, her stride resettles into something deliberate and concentrated.

Jonas lowers his hand slowly. He watches her walk the curve of the gravel path, the hounds pacing neat around her boots, and a small crease forms between his brows. He's seen that posture before— Shoulders tight, jaw set against something she won't name.

He traces a circle in the fog of his breath against the windowpane, the faint heat from his palm blooming on the glass.

I knew it. She must be hurting again, he thinks, feeling a small pang in

his chest. *And still working through it.*

She disappears from view past the hedge of yew and cypress, the sound of her whistling faint through the wind. Jonas lingers, eyes following the spot where she vanished.

He picks up the tray again, feeling the weight of the bottles and rags shift against his arm, and keeps walking down the hall. The air feels a little colder now, and though he doesn't look back, he keeps seeing her in his mind. Her hair caught by the breeze, the steady lift of her arm and the distant, unreturned warmth of it.

He had already decided that he'd bring Branwen something warm when he finished his rounds. He wasn't sure what yet. Perhaps mulled cider or the honeyed tea, but watching her from the window cements it. She looked like someone who'd refused rest out of sheer stubbornness. He understands that impulse too well.

Still, work comes first.

Jonas shifts the tray in his arms and moves on, the corridor stretching before him in a quiet rhythm. Finished with Lord Harland, he begins more general cleaning. His motions are steady and he falls into them the way some people fall into prayer. The scent of soap follows him, chased by the faint metallic tang of polish.

When he turns down the servants' passage, the change is immediate. The polished floors give way to scuffed boards, and the air loses its perfume and becomes heavier: Laundry steam, old brick, the ghost of last night's stew. The light is different here too, thin and dust-flecked, filtering through the narrow windows that no noble ever sees. The walls are close enough that the tray brushes against them as he walks.

At the end of the corridor, the mail cubbies wait. The narrow slots line the wall like a row of small mouths, most of them yawning empty letter boxes. His name— *Jonas Ellery*— is written in tidy script above one.

He hesitates.

There might be something in there today. There might be a letter from Eliam. His brother's handwriting always carries a kind of weight; even thinking of it makes Jonas's stomach turn. He can't stop thinking about Lina's cousin. How she must be so very respectable and proper. Someone who would, apparently, take care of him. Possibly even be *gracious* enough to ignore his stutter. Someone Jonas *ought* to meet.

Jonas's fingers hover over the slot. He tells himself he doesn't *have* to read it, if there is one at all. A man can't be haunted by a letter if he never opens it.

Still. It's his brother. He can't ignore him forever.

He draws his hand back and wipes it against his apron, glancing sideways down the hall. The air in this part of the servants' wing always feels cooler somehow, as if the walls hold on to drafts that don't belong to any door or window. He's half convinced something lingers here. A watching presence, not quite cruel but not kindly either. He remembers, once or twice, his grandparents warning that fair folk loved letters. They crept through cracks in the night to slip words inside them, changing meanings by morning. *"Best to wait till daylight,"* They'd say, *"And best not to read bad news alone."*

Jonas brings his hand back briefly to the wood of the cubby, as if testing for warmth or for any… nefarious presences.

Behind him, the corridor stays still. Too still. He doesn't look back. Jonas has learned that much from stories: *You never look, never call, never invite anything closer. Not until you've got work done and light at your back.*

…*I should wait tomorrow,* he thinks desperately, before throwing his head back with a suppressed groan, *But what if Eliam visits again because I took too long to reply to his letters, if he sent any…?*

Jonas tells himself he'll only check quickly— there probably isn't anything— but he already knows the weight sitting there belongs to him. He hesitates before opening it. Now he's afraid of omens in letters, left by the fair folk. He saw a crow had flown over the stables this morning, dark wings flashing like a warning. Old stories told him that to open a letter under a crow's shadow was to invite misfortune.

He shuts his eyes and opens the letter box.

Then Jonas dares open one eye.

There is an envelope.

He can only stand and stare. He remains motionless when another servant approaches and checks their own mail and then leaves. Jonas swallows thickly, his throat feeling like sandpaper. If he keeps staring, he thinks he might break into a cold sweat. Hesitantly, he picks up the envelope. The homemade seal immediately tells him it's from Eliam— not like Jonas gets mail from anyone else— and a prick of dread crawls down his spine.

Jonas only turns the letter over in his hands. The paper's thin, creased a little at the corners from handling. Eliam must've folded it twice, the way he always does when he's nervous. The sight alone tightens his

chest. He wants to believe it's only an ordinary note. Something harmless, a recipe his brother is excited to share, or talk of the weather back home. But there's a heaviness to it, a knowing weight in his palm, and he can almost hear his brother's voice inside, all well-meant concern and clumsy affection where every word leaves him feeling smaller somehow, like a seam tugged tighter. A proper brother would open it right away. A wiser man would burn it unread and be done with it, casting the omens and fair folk into the flames.

Instead, Jonas exhales, thumb pressed to the seal until the wax softens slightly under his skin, and tears it open.

Jonas,

I hope this finds you in good health and better company than when last I visited. The inn has been quiet enough of late to afford me the luxury of writing, and Lina has been pressing me to do so. She says I must stop fretting over "that solemn little brother of mine," because I shall soon be fretting over someone else…

She means to begin trying for a child, Jonas.

I am… well, I don't quite know what I am. Grateful, I suppose, and frightened in equal measure. The thought of it sits strange with me. A house and inn full of a different kind of noise, of new duties, of someone small who looks to me for answers I'm not sure I'll ever have. I haven't said any of this to Lina, of course. She is radiant with the idea— she speaks of names, of linens, of how the nursery will face the morning light— and I nod, as I should. But at night I lie awake and wonder what sort of father I could possibly make.

Not that I have much choice in the matter. If Lina wants a child, we will have a child. Such is the way of things.

Perhaps that is why I've been so insistent, of late, about you meeting her cousin. It isn't only about your prospects or reputation (though those matter too). It's that the world seems to be shifting under my feet, and I find myself wanting to hold fast to what I know— to you. Writing it out makes me sound like some sentimental fool. But I think, if you were nearby, if you had someone of your own, it might steady me and make this all the less frightening.

You will be safer wed to someone who can take care of you. You needn't deal with those unfriendly lads or that wretched woman at the estate, either.

I'd like for you to be kept close. Wouldn't it be nice to be near your future niece or nephew? Perhaps you could even assist with the inn, if you're so inclined. Oh, to think you'll soon be an uncle! I almost feel more excited over that than myself becoming a father, haha!

I've written and crossed out these lines more times than I can count. There never seem to be the right words. Still, I would have you know: you are thought of daily.

—Eliam

P.S. Tell me if you are eating properly. And if there are fair winds where you are. Lina says she dreamt of crows over the fields last night, and you know what grandmother used to say of crows. I believe it only a coincidence but I know that you still believe in that stuff… So keep an eye out, will you?

Eliam's handwriting is tidy at first, then grows uneven halfway through, as though his hand trembled. Jonas reads it slowly, tracing each curve of ink like it might vanish. The words *trying for a child*

catch in his chest, like he's swallowed something sharp.

Eliam would probably sound proud and flustered under the veneer of his fake genteel accent. But beneath the formality he can feel it. The fear, the cracking edge of it. He imagines Eliam pacing at the inn, rewriting sentences, drinking too-strong tea, convincing himself this letter will fix something it cannot. Jonas should feel tenderness. And he does, partly. But mostly, something else wells up. A kind of hurt. A quiet, helpless frustration that tightens behind his ribs.

Why hadn't Eliam said any of this when he was here? Why not just *talk* to him properly? Why all the talk of virtue and manners, of finding a wife, of *fixing* him— as if Jonas were some task that needed managing since he was a child? He'd listened to his brother ramble about cures for stuttering and about Lina's cousin. All of it dressed in care, but never once had Eliam asked what Jonas wanted.

Did he even care to know, truly?

You are thought of daily.

A tightness climbs up his throat. Why all the pretending? It feels cruel, somehow. *Cowardly.*

For all his talk of wanting Jonas to have more than the estate, Eliam had never seen what Jonas already had. What quiet life he'd managed to carve for himself between dogs and kitchens and soft dawns. Did he think Jonas hadn't grown at all? He bites his lip. If only he spoke to him during Covenant Day. Told him he fought Merrill and spoke up against Fenn, if only to get his brother to stop fretting the way he does.

Jonas presses his thumb against the fold of the letter, a faint tremor

running through him. The paper crackles softly in the empty corridor.

Would anything even change if he told Eliam no?

If he said it plain, that he doesn't want to leave, doesn't want to marry, doesn't want to be reshaped into the kind of man Eliam thinks he should be. Would Eliam listen? Or would he just smile that patient, pitying smile and say, *"You'll understand one day."*

The thought burns.

And yet… beneath the anger, there's still that stupid, loyal pang of guilt.

Eliam will be a father soon. Jonas will be an uncle. He should be happy for him. He wants to be.

But the truth curls in his chest like smoke.

He folds the letter carefully, smoothing its edges with his thumb, as if gentleness might make up for the bitterness rising in him. The words blur for a moment before he tucks it back into the cubby.

Then he wipes his hands on his apron and goes back to work.

By evening, the house hums with departure.

The front hall gleams brighter than it has in months. The Lady stands poised near the great doors while Lord Harland adjusts his cuffs, the gold threads in his waistcoat catching the lamplight like threads of flame. Voices overlap, footwomen in livery calling for the carriage lamps to be lit, Maud giving last-minute orders, maids whispering quick appraisals of gowns and jewels as they pass. Outside, hooves strike the cobbles in brisk, nervous rhythm. The Gala waits somewhere far beyond the estate's gates.

Jonas keeps to the edges of it all. He's helped with the polishing earlier, of course— the silver buckles on Lord Harland's cloak clasp, the fine dust brushed from the velvet train— but once the procession begins forming, he fades toward the back of the corridor. He bows as they pass, eyes lowered, a respectful shadow against the wall.

The Lady sweeps out first, her laughter trailing like perfume. Lord Harland follows a step behind, the faintest tension in his shoulders betraying his apparent dislike of such spectacle. The upper servants fall in behind them: Maud, the valet, two maids, the kitchen's head boy. The carriages creak and lurch forward, wheels grinding softly over gravel, until the noise dwindles to nothing but the echo of the front door shutting.

And just like that, the house exhales.

The echoing chatter fades, leaving behind a strange hush. It isn't silence exactly. More like the subdued murmur of a place settling after movement. From somewhere in the distance comes the faint clatter of dishes being stacked and the hum of a broom against flagstones. Servants not chosen for the Gala begin drifting back to their usual duties, but even their work feels different tonight, the rhythm looser and less watched. Jonas lingers at the base of the main staircase a moment longer, hands fidgeting with the hem of his apron. The polish still clings faintly to his skin. He imagines Branwen somewhere out near the kennels, ready to hand the chosen hounds off to the procession. She would never have any interest in Galas or finery— he

almost smiles at the thought of it— but the memory of her face in the parterre lingers, that tautness in her expression.

He turns toward the scullery.

The air grows cooler as he descends, heavy with the smell of damp stone, yeast, and the faint sweetness of drying apples. Lamps burn low here. Servants on laundry duty have finished their washing and left the basins empty, water still glimmering faintly at the bottom of one. Jonas moves through the room quietly, his steps soft against the worn floor. He finds the old copper pot on its hook and sets it over the small stove, filling it halfway with cider from a jug and a little water to temper it.

He works by instinct more than recipe. A stick of cinnamon. A sliver of ginger from the pantry jar. A spoonful of honey that glows deep gold when it hits the liquid. The smell blooms almost at once, spiced and warm, the sort of scent that reminds him of harvest nights when his grandparents would heat drink over the hearth for everyone who'd come in from the fields. It reminds him of the cake he baked for her. He should make something else again sometime. To think he can comfortably make something down here now, without fear of being accused of stealing.

Jonas leans his hip against the counter as the mixture begins to simmer. The steam fogs the copper and his own thoughts drift with it. Eliam's letter comes back to his mind. He hasn't even decided if he will answer it yet. If Jonas looked at a blank piece of parchment, would all the words he wants to say to Eliam vanish like smoke? Would he just write a meek non-answer and let his brother continue on as usual? Jonas doesn't resent the idea of marriage itself; he knows what's expected. Men go where their wives are. They take their wives' names. Their crests change, their places shift. That's the order of things. But the frustration remains. The resentment continues to simmer, and Jonas doesn't know if he will simply… not do anything about it again.

So he tries to stop thinking about it. Jonas only stirs the pot slowly, watching the surface ripple.

He imagines Branwen's hands, raw from work, curling around the cup. Maybe she will jokingly scoff at the gesture at first, saying she's no invalid and that she can make her own damn tea, but he also knows that she'll drink it anyway, the grudging thanks that carries more weight than any polished courtesy.

The drink begins to thicken slightly, the scent filling the low-ceilinged room. Jonas pours it into a mug— plain earthenware, chipped at the rim but clean— and wipes the spill from its side with his sleeve. He pauses, then adds one last touch: A slice of apple, cut thin enough to curl at the edge.

He blows out the lamp and lets the quiet reclaim the scullery.

Outside, the wind brushes along the outer walls, carrying the faint sound of dogs somewhere in the distance. He tucks the mug carefully in both hands, the heat steadying him, and starts down the passage toward the stables and kennels. Toward Branwen.

Branwen stays until the last carriage rolls out of sight. The night swallows the sound of hooves, and the gates close with a dull iron thud that leaves the air oddly hollow.

The procession itself looks almost spectral in the growing darkness. Three coaches in total, lacquered black and trimmed in gilt, their wheels throwing sparks on the cobbles as they turn. The Lady rides in the foremost, her crest painted bold on the door panels, a cluster of silk ribbons fluttering from the lantern hooks. Behind her, Lord Harland's coach moves more sedately, curtains drawn against the

cold. The third is smaller, meant for the upper servants who attend the Gala.

Lanterns swing from the harness poles, halos of gold wavering over the horses' flanks. The last burst of laughter from the Lady's entourage echoes off the stone like music already fading.

The hounds have gone ahead, trotting proud beside the procession with the stablehands assigned to be present for the Gala. The rest will sleep in the kennels till dawn. When the final set of wheels vanishes down the lane and the torches dim to faint glows in the evening air, the yard feels too large, its emptiness a kind of echo. Branwen heads back inside. Only Esther lingers by the tack room, probably half-hoping for permission to turn in. The girl's face is ruddy from the cold, hair coming loose from her braid.

"Go on," Branwen says, unbuckling her gloves, "You've done enough for tonight."

Esther hesitates, "And Brenna?"

"Stop by her room before you turn in. Make sure she's taken broth, she should be back to work by dawn."

Esther nods, relief softening her face, "Yes, Hunting Marshal."

Branwen only jerks her chin toward the door, "Go."

When the girl's gone, the quiet folds in properly. A wind pushes through the half-open shutters, stirring the hay. Lanterns burn low, halos of dull gold against the beams. Somewhere a horse stamps and

shifts. Branwen moves through the passage where the stables connect with the kennels, finishing what's left undone. She hangs up buckles and clears a bit of straw. Each movement is careful, but by the time she reaches the last stall, her belly begins another round of its low aching twisting.

It's always worse when she's been on her feet all day.

She crouches to pull the brush box forward, and a sharp pain blooms deep in her abdomen, stealing her breath. She stays there a moment, bent over, until it ebbs enough to stand.

She pauses by the tack bench and adjusts the padded liner beneath her trousers. It's a simple but well-made thing, common as soap in a house like this. The pressure helps a little, though the warmth in her gut still burns dull and deep. She grits her teeth and draws a steadying breath, waiting for the spasm to ease.

The pain doesn't leave, but dulls enough for her to work. She finds Rilke waiting in her stall, ears pricked at the sound of the brush box scraping forward.

"Easy, girl," Branwen mutters, "You've more sense than the lot of them."

The mare snorts softly, breath warm against Branwen's shoulder. She starts brushing, and the rhythm steadies her some. Rilke's coat gleams, each sweep of the brush drawing a little calm back into the world. But another spasm catches her mid-motion. She grunts, the sound swallowed by the rafters, and leans her forehead against the mare's neck until it passes. Sweat beads cold along her spine.

"Damn thing," She whispers, though she's not sure if she means the

pain or the life that keeps marching through it.

Rilke shifts closer, patient and solid. Branwen's hand slides up the mare's neck, fingers gripping the coarse mane for balance.

Outside, the wind changes into something cooler, carrying the scent of apples.

Branwen straightens slowly and blinks toward the stable door. Footsteps approach along the passage.

Jonas, she thinks a bit *too* excitedly, though she can't yet see him. She settles Rilke in the stall and exits it, waiting for him to enter.

One of the side doors leading directly into the stables portion of the structure eases open with a sigh of hinges, and there he is. His shoulders are hunched against the cold, a faint steam curling up from the mug in his hands. The lamplight catches on his hair, gold where it should be brown, and on the sheen of the drink's surface.

"Y-you're st–s-still working," He says softly. The words come with effort, his tongue catching on *still* before he makes it through. He pauses at the entryway for a second, before stepping over the shadow and keeping to the light's edge.

"Someone has to. My room's right by the animals so I can take care of them when they inevitably get spooked by something harmless."

Jonas smiles and steps closer, careful not to startle the mare, "Th–th–then at least… d–drink this. Y–you… L-looked like y-you were hu–hurting."

Branwen eyes the mug as he offers it. The smell hits first— cinnamon, ginger, a trace of honey— and warmth gathers in her chest before she's even taken it, "You didn't have to. I can make my own tea, you know," She murmurs, taking it from him anyway.

"B–but I… d–don't wa–want to see y–you h–hurt."

His hands hover at his sides like he doesn't know what to do with them now that the cup's gone. Branwen lifts the cup to her lips. The liquid burns pleasantly, chasing away the ache in her belly for a heartbeat or two. "Damn. That's good," She breathes, a small sigh escaping with the steam, "Thank you."

Jonas ducks his head a little, a flush rising in his neck, but the smile doesn't quite settle. His jaw works, thumb rubbing at the seam of his apron as though he's counting heartbeats.

Branwen leans her hip against the stall rail, sipping again. The silence between them turns companionable, the sort of quiet that doesn't need to be filled. Outside, the wind rustles through the empty yard. Rilke shifts her weight, a hoof scraping the packed dirt. Lanternlight throws a soft gold on the mare's flank, on the scuffed floorboards, on Jonas's face.

He's standing oddly still. Too still, even for him. Every so often his fingers twitch at his sides, like there's a word caught in them he can't get free. His gaze keeps darting to the ground, then back to her, then away again. Branwen watches over the rim of her cup, pretending not to notice at first. She likes the warmth, the smell, the small comfort of company at the end of a long day. But his fidgeting is impossible to ignore.

Finally, when another set of cramps eases a little, she sets the mug down on the stall rail with a soft clink. “All right then. Out with it. You’ve that look again— like someone’s taken a file to your insides.”

He shakes his head too fast, “It’s—n–nothing. R–really.”

She snorts, “Nothing. You made me tea, walked all the way here in the dark, and look like you’ve swallowed a stone. Try again.”

Jonas exhales through his nose, the sound small and tight. His shoulders hunch, eyes fixed on the straw at his boots, “I—” The word comes out dry, frayed at the edge. He tries again, stumbling on the next syllable, “I j–just… I g–got a l–l–letter.”

Branwen waits, arms crossed loosely. The ache in her belly has eased to a small weight, softened by the drink’s warmth, but it still pulses low, persistent as tide. When he doesn’t go on, she prompts, gentler now, “From who?”

His thumb picks at a polish stain on his apron until it smears darker.

“M–my b–brother.”

“Eliam? What’s he gone and said this time?”

He still doesn’t look at her. The mare shifts behind them, stamping softly, and the lantern hums faintly against its hook. The silence stretches thin, long enough that Branwen’s patience begins to fray at the edges.

“Well? What’s he written that’s put you in such a twist?”

Jonas’s jaw works, but no sound comes at first. His lips part, close again. “It’s n–not—” He breathes out, ragged, trying to force the thought into order, “He’s—”

Another pause. His fingers curl into his apron, knuckles pale. There’s something almost painful in the effort of it. Not the stutter itself, but the holding back. The way he seems to weigh every word before it risks the air.

When he finally speaks, it comes out half a whisper, “You’ll th–think it’s st–stupid.”

“I’ll think that if you keep dancing around it,” Branwen says, though her tone softens.

That earns the faintest twitch at the corner of his mouth, but it fades fast, “His w-wife… L–Lina w–wants a ch–child,” he says at last, and the words sound both proud and hollow, like something he’s rehearsed but not yet learned how to mean, “H–he’s… n–not r–ready, b–but h–he’s tr–trying. H–he th–thinks I sh–should m–marry. L–Lina’s c–cousin. S–says it’ll k–keep me s–safe.”

Branwen goes still. Her belly still feels warm from the drink, but the rest of her turns cold. The silence that follows isn’t empty; it’s thick with the unspoken things she’s been afraid to name. She swallows hard against the taste in her throat and forces out a weak scoff.

“…Safe from what? Fresh air and work?”

Jonas shifts, eyes darting down, “H–he’s w–worried. S–says I’ll b–be b–better off if s–someone c–can t–take c–care of m–me,” He murmurs. The next breath shudders out of him, “Wants m–me to s–settle so–somewhere n–near him. I think th–that h–he thinks that… I c–can’t look after m–myself.”

His words land like grit between her teeth.

Branwen stares at him, her fingers clenching and unclenching. She’s trying to be reasonable, but a sharp feeling in her chest twists until it hurts. She pictures him standing in some neat little inn, the smell of beer and hearth smoke instead of hay, wearing his good shirt, quiet and small beside a woman chosen *for* him— not *by* him. The thought hits her in the gut. Her throat suddenly burns.

She tells herself that she shouldn’t feel this. But gods, she already knows she can’t imagine herself or him being apart.

He continues, still gentle, still trying to make sense of his brother’s wishes, and every word he tells her about the letter just drives the nail deeper.

“I suppose he means well,” She says too quickly, the words scraping out harshly, “But that’s a selfish letter, Jonas.”

He looks up, startled, like she’s said something blasphemous, “It’s n–not. He’s j–just… he’s a–afraid. Th–the inn’s ch–changing. H–he th–thinks I’m… h–having a ha–h-hard time h–here…”

Branwen exhales sharply through her nose, “Maybe. And maybe he’s scared and trying to hold you still because it makes him feel steadier.”

Her tone gentles when he blinks at her, caught between wanting to defend his brother and knowing she's right. She presses a hand to her knee, grounding herself, "I've known that kind of love before. The kind that's all holding on and no letting live. I did that with my sisters."

The words leave her before she can catch them. Regret flickers across her face. The ghosts never miss their chance, it seems. The flood, the breaking apart, the endless ache of wanting to keep what was already gone.

"Your brother wants to keep you safe," She says finally, quieter now, "That's not the same as wanting you happy."

Jonas's hands worry at his sleeves, his breath uneven from the effort of speaking. He looks younger like this— Unmoored and uncertain, trying to make sense of a world that keeps asking him to be grateful for its cages.

She watches him and feels the ache rise again, hot and helpless. She'd once called him lucky to have someone chase after him. But now, after Covenant Day, after tears and trembling and all the small, impossible tenderness they've shared, she sees it for what it is. Not luck. Just another kind of chain. Fear dressed as love.

Just like hers once was.

Branwen leans forward, her voice a low rasp, "What do you want, Jonas?"

He startles, eyes flicking up to hers. His pupils shine dark.

“N–not… that. I do–don’t want to… l-leave the es–e-estate.”

Something softens in her then. It’s relief, maybe. Or hope. Or just the unbearable pull of wanting to keep him close.

Then, she just looks at him, and the thought that nearly escapes her— *You could stay. With me.*— feels so real she almost tastes it. But she swallows it down and instead reaches for her cup again, downs the rest of it, and sits it down a little too hard as a brief cramp is dulled by the comforting, warm liquid.

“Good,” She mutters, the word carrying more weight than it should, “Then don’t.”

Jonas finally looks at her— really looks— and whatever distance there was between them seems to shrink to nothing. The silence hums between them, thick with everything neither of them say. Branwen feels her face warm despite her effort to keep it cool.

“You’ve a right to your own ground, Jonas. You’ve worked hard for it. Don’t let anyone, even kin, tell you where to stand.”

“He w–won’t l–listen,” He whispers, “He n–never d–does.”

“Then write it plain. Don’t ask him to understand. Tell him. Tell him you’re well. Tell him you’ve got work that matters. Tell him you can and have taken care of yourself. Merrill and Fenn have been properly cowed. Tell him you’ve—” She catches herself before saying *me,* “— people here who respect you.”

“Y–you th–think he’ll b–believe it?”

“Doesn’t matter if he does,” She says, steady and sure, “You’ll have said it.”

Jonas nods, just once. The kind of nod that looks like a promise— To himself, maybe, or to her.

Branwen thinks the talk might be done then. The air’s settled; her cramps have eased to a hum, and Jonas seems calmer. She’s about to hand him a brush, to let the motion fill the silence—

“W–write t–to your sisters.”

The brush slips from her hand. It hits the packed earth with a soft *thud* that sounds too loud in the quiet. For a beat, she doesn’t move. Doesn’t breathe.

Then the rest follows quietly, almost apologetically, “L–like I sh–should m–my b–brother.”

The words find their mark before she can even think to shield herself. Her stomach tightens, the ache returning sharp and sudden, as if the heat from her drink’s gone cold all at once. Of all the things he could have said— some apology, another half-start about his brother— *this* was the one she hadn’t braced for.

She lets out a short, incredulous laugh that tastes like iron.

“…Don’t be daft. I wouldn’t even know where to send it.”

Jonas only shrugs, the movement small but steady, “H–Hesta went to L–Llyncraig, d–didn’t she? A b–bookkeeper’s a–apprentice?”

Branwen blinks. She doesn’t remember telling him that. She must have, though— Back when she was too wrung out to guard her tongue, that rainy night the old grief came clawing back. The fact that he remembers that detail at all causes her throat to tighten, “That was years ago.”

“St–still a p–place to st–start.” His voice stumbles but doesn’t break. His eyes, when they lift to hers, are bright with that quiet, maddening conviction she knows too well. “M–maybe she’s still th–there. Or s–someone w–would know where she went.”

Branwen shakes her head. “It’s not that simple,” A tinge of frustration comes crawling up her throat. Not at Jonas, but at herself.

“It r–rarely is,” Jonas says softly, “B–but you c–could tr–try.”

She wants to laugh again, sharper this time to shake it off, to tell him he doesn’t understand. But Jonas is looking at her with that same faith that has no business surviving in a world like this. Faith in letters reaching their mark, in people finding each other after long years apart.

“You think the world’s small as a stable yard, don’t you?”

He smiles shyly, “Sm–small enough th–that people f–find each other, s–sometimes.”

Her throat continues to tighten before she can stop it. *Sometimes,* he says, like it's a promise.

She's seen so many maps in her life. All neatly inked spreads across The Lady's desk or in the papers, all pale blues and ochres, rail lines and trade routes drawn like veins. She's traced them idly while waiting for orders, memorised the names of a half dozen ports she's never seen and probably never will. But standing here now, she realises she's never really looked at a map of her *own* country. Not properly. Not past the roads that lead out of the valley. She's just seen those endless colonies, lines reaching out and away, as if everything that mattered had to exist somewhere else.

Llyncraig. She mouths the name, as though saying it softly might make it sound familiar. It doesn't. She has no sense of where it lies. North, south, by the coast or the mountains. It's absurd, really, how small her world has suddenly become at this moment.

If she dares hold onto that same, absurd faith as Jonas, she might be foolish enough to let herself believe that her sisters may actually be closer than she thinks.

Then she sighs hard, the kind of sound like it's meant to clear the air but doesn't quite. She leans back against the stall door, crossing her arms tight across her chest, "Anyway," she says, "It's a fool's errand. Over ten years is too long. They'll have gone and built their own lives by now. Families, maybe. Children grown tall as fenceposts." She huffs a short laugh, "They've no use for a stray who never wrote."

Jonas doesn't answer right away. He just watches her, steady and unflinching in that quiet, stubborn way of his. The look that always seems to be gathering courage from somewhere she can't see.

"I th–think," He starts slowly, the words catching but coming anyway,

“They’d b–be happy to kn–know you’re alive.”

The words hit like another blow she doesn’t see coming. They settle in her chest, a weight she fully wasn’t expecting, pressing against her ribs and making her pause mid-breath. It’s so simple, so *Jonas*— earnest and unguarded— and yet it threatens to make tears spill from her eyes. *Happy to know you’re alive.* As if being alive could make up for how much she *didn’t* do during all those years.

Branwen looks away, her jaw working, “You don’t know that,” She mutters, “You don’t know the full extent of what I left behind.”

But he doesn’t flinch, doesn’t fill the space with apologies. He just stands there, shoulders drawn but eyes still steady. For all his hesitations, Jonas looks at people like he believes in them, and she feels something shift uncomfortably inside her. Admiration and affection and fear, all tangled up.

Because what if he’s right?

What if she did find them? What then? What could she possibly say after all this time? That she’d left because she couldn’t bear to stay, because grief had hollowed her out and she hadn’t known how to be a sister anymore? That she’d rather have been no one at all than the one who stayed behind? That the thought of writing to them hadn’t even crossed her mind until it was too late?

The thought makes her chest ache. So she does what she always does when a feeling cuts too close— Branwen redirects.

“Your brother,” She blurts, forcing her tone to become something dry, “He’d love this Gala nonsense, wouldn’t he?”

Surprise flickers across Jonas's expression.

Branwen's mouth quirks at the sight, "All the lace and ribbons and speeches. I can see him now. Chin high, wine glass in hand, pretending he belongs among the nobles. He'd eat it up."

The ache that had been creeping up her throat recedes a little, pushed down by the comfort of familiar teasing. It's easier to talk about other people's foolishness than her own regrets. Easier to joke about brothers than to think about sisters she hasn't seen in over a decade.

"Maybe he'd even get a dance in," She says, voice deliberately light, "That's what genteel folk do at those things, isn't it? Waltz and curtsy and pretend they don't step on each other's toes."

Jonas blinks at her. The light now catches the edge of his jaw, the curve of his cheek, the faint pink at the tips of his ears. His hair is neatly combed and his hands still faintly polished with soap. He looks every bit the house servant keeping to decorum. But his eyes— soft, dark, and far too open— make the air around them feel smaller, close enough that she can feel her own pulse catch in her throat.

He swallows, the motion subtle but visible, "M–maybe," His voice is quiet and unsure, but he doesn't look away.

He's so careful all the time, so measured. And yet, he's looking at her now like she's something worth risking steadiness for.

Before she can think better of it, Branwen sweeps into a half bow, one arm extended with exaggerated grace, mocking the courtly manners she's only ever seen from a distance.

“Care to demonstrate, then, Lord Jonas?”

The jest tastes light enough on her tongue, but beneath it her heart’s already starting to thrum too fast.

Jonas blinks at her, caught somewhere between alarm and amusement, “L–Lord?” He echoes, his stutter catching softly on the word, colour rising to his cheeks.

She smirks, rolling her shoulders in an exaggerated shrug, “Well, someone’s got to keep up appearances. You’d fit right in. Trim your hair, starch your cuffs, look miserable.”

“I’d f–fall over m–my own b–boots before the m–music started.”

“I’m sure that’d still put you ahead of half the Ladies and Lords at the Gala right now.” She tilts her chin at him, all mock-challenge, “Go on, prove me wrong.”

He hesitates, and Branwen can *see* the thought settle in him. That careful gathering of nerve, the way his hands flex like he’s weighing the cost of saying yes. Then, quietly, he says, “I—uh—if y–you’d l–like.”

And just like that, it’s her turn to lose her footing.

Oh shite.

Her heart feels like it's going to lurch out of her chest.

I didn't actually think he'd say yes.

She straightens too quickly, the humour catching in her throat. Her palms are suddenly damp, and she can feel the heat climbing up her neck, "Well— I don't— I don't actually know how to dance," She fumbles, trying for flippant and landing somewhere closer to breathless.

Rilke flicks an ear, shifting in the stall behind them, and Branwen's absurdly aware of how loud her heartbeat sounds in the quiet. She *meant* it as a joke—she always means it as a joke—but Jonas is still standing there, eyes lowered, a shy smile ghosting across his face like he's thinking it might not be one after all. It's the sort of smile that could undo a person if they weren't careful.

"Th–then we'll b–both st–step on each other's t–toes."

The grin that follows is small and uncertain, but it reaches his eyes this time, softening the worry that usually lives there. Something in Branwen gives way.

"All right, then," She hears herself say, surprising even her own tongue, "Let's try it."

Jonas's lips part, as if she's called a bluff he didn't mean to make. Branwen's palm feels suddenly too aware, her pulse a live thing under the skin. She steps forward before she can talk herself out of it and takes his hand.

It's meant to be a simple, practical gesture— it's just a hand, after all — but the moment her fingers close around his, the air sharpens. He's warm. His skin is slightly calloused from work but still soft, and he stiffens, like the contact startles him too.

For a moment they just stand there, the lanternlight catching on the straw, the scent of polish and hay and cold iron thick around them. Branwen half expects him to pull away, to nervously laugh it off, but instead he shifts closer, uncertain but willing. His other hand lifts, hovers awkwardly near her shoulder, then lands there with a kind of hesitant reverence.

The stables feel impossibly small now. Every breath visible, every movement magnified. Somewhere above, the faint strains of birds in the loft can be heard— Soft and muffled, as though reaching them through water.

Branwen swallows hard, "See?" She murmurs, trying for humour and missing the mark entirely. "Just like how it would be at the Gala."

Jonas looks down at her, his voice almost a whisper, "B–better, I th–think."

He's gotten a little too adept at making her flustered.

Throat tight and heart racing, she gives him another once over. His lashes cast small shadows when he blinks, and there's a kind of careful concentration in the way he holds himself, like one wrong move might break the moment. He isn't polished, not in the way the manor women like their men, but there's something finer in him all the same: The quiet steadiness of someone who notices everything and says little.

She feels Jonas's thumb twitch against her knuckles.

Rilke snorts behind them, the sound startling enough that Branwen gives a nervous, almost-laughing huff, "All right. How hard can it be?"

Jonas smiles softly, as though the question might actually need an answer. He shifts his feet, clearly waiting for her to take the lead. Which, of course, means she has to.

Branwen blinks down at their joined hands. Sees the red twine around his wrist and her traitorous heart does an infuriating jump. One hand in his; the other just sort of… hovers stupidly in the air, "Do I—uh…" She starts, then cuts herself off with a frustrated noise, "Where does this one go?"

Jonas's eyes dart up, wide and a little startled, "I—uh—th–think the l–lady's h–hand g–goes… here." He gestures, faintly, toward his own waist.

Of course it does. She didn't think about that sort of touch when she jokingly asked him to dance.

Branwen hesitates. The space between them feels too small now, too alive. She can hear his breathing, shallow and careful, and realizes hers isn't much better, "That all right?" She asks quietly.

Jonas meets her eyes, then gives the smallest nod, "Y–yes." His voice cracks on the word, but it sounds more like nerves than fear.

So she lets out a slow breath, more like a surrender than a decision, and moves her hand to rest at his waist. His shirt is warm beneath her

palm, softer than she expects. The heat of him seeps into her skin, and all she can think about is just the touch of his hand and body.

Jonas inhales sharply but doesn't pull back. If anything, he leans in— just enough that the air between them changes and deepens. His other hand returns to her shoulder and everything feels suddenly… electrified.

"Right," Branwen murmurs, though she's not sure she's convincing anyone, "Just a bit of practice. No harm in that."

He nods again, eyes lowered and lashes trembling. When they finally start to move— clumsy, hesitant, feet brushing more than stepping— it's almost absurd how careful they both are, as if the floor might give out if they misstep. But then he glances up, and she catches the flicker of a smile. It's shy, yes, but it's also radiant and the biggest one he's had since coming here, like he can't quite believe this is happening. And Branwen, curse her, feels a fierce and bright sensation uncurl in her chest, something that's been waiting far too long to be touched.

They keep moving, if it can even be called that. A shuffle, a sway, her boot grazing his toe, his heel bumping the straw. The rhythm is uncertain, almost laughable, but neither of them seems able to stop. They awkwardly sway toward the direction of the tack room.

Jonas now keeps his gaze fixed on their feet, as though willing them to cooperate. His brow furrows in concentration, lips parted just slightly as he counts some silent measure. Branwen, trying to follow, nearly trips over his boot. Her laugh bursts out— too sharp, too high — and she mutters, "We're hopeless. I guess dancing doesn't have the same effect when there's no music."

"W–we'll g–get it," He says, almost breathlessly. The stutter doesn't break the warmth in his tone, it only softens it.

Another twist in her chest. She shouldn't be this close. Not tonight, not with her belly still aching dully beneath the waistband of her trousers, the warmth of his drink only just holding the worst of the cramps at bay. But she can't seem to care. The ache now feels like it belongs to something larger. Some raw and alive thing.

She shifts, her palm steadying more firmly at his waist. The move makes him blink up in surprise, their faces suddenly too near. His breath catches; hers follows.

Jonas's hair's come a little undone, a stray lock brushing his temple. Branwen finds herself wanting— ridiculously— to smooth it back.

Jonas seems to try to remember where to place his feet, but she can feel the tremor through him, the barely-there tension in his shoulders. When her thumb moves, almost unconsciously, tracing the fabric of his shirt, his breath stutters again.

"You're shaking," She murmurs.

His answer comes soft, "Y–you too."

And she is. Gods, she is. Not just from nerves, but from the pull that's grown between them, something hot and steady beneath the fragile sway of their bodies.

Their steps slowly find a kind of rhythm. It's nothing graceful, but it's real. The straw rustles beneath their boots; with every stall they pass the horses shift, watching with quiet animal bewilderment. A lantern hums faintly, throwing their shadows across the boards in an uneven dance of its own. Branwen's abdomen tightens briefly with another

cramp, enough to make her breath hitch, and she feels Jonas's hand steady at her back before she can step wrong. His fingers are gentle, hesitant but sure, the kind of touch that asks permission even as it offers support.

"A–are you o–o-okay?" He whispers.

She nods, voice caught somewhere in her chest, "Fine. Keep going."

He does.

Their steps carry them down the narrow aisle, the rhythm faltering and finding itself again. The air feels thicker here, warmer with each breath. She can hear the soft drag of his shoes against the floor, the faint creak of leather from a nearby bridle. Their joined hands sway between them, a small, shared anchor.

Branwen's shoulder brushes his when either of them steps too quickly. It happens once, twice. The third time, neither of them shifts away.

Jonas keeps his hand lightly on her shoulder, the way a man's meant to follow a woman's lead. But it trembles faintly, just enough for her to feel it. His fingers twitch nervously once, and it sends a sharp flutter again in her chest.

And in the midst of it, Jonas whispers, "Y–you're g–good at this."

"You're an awful liar."

“I m–mean it,” He insists, his voice gaining strength, if only a little, “It f–feels…” He trails off, searching, eyes darting from her shoulder to her mouth and back again, “R–right.”

Branwen tries to force her pulse back to something reasonable.

Her hand at his waist is meant to guide him, though she’s hardly sure she remembers how to move at all half the time now. The fabric of his shirt is soft, yet she thinks that his bare skin might even feel softer on her palm. Each step brings her thumb lower, tracing the edge of his belt, the smooth line of muscle that moves when he breathes. She doesn’t mean to— *really, she doesn’t*— but she finds herself pressing just slightly closer, her fingers splaying as if the steadiness she needs might be found in him.

He smells faintly of soap and yeast, the kind that lingers from long hours in the kitchen. Beneath that, something warmer— *Him.*

At their joined hands, she feels him tighten his fingers just ever so slightly. There’s colour high in his cheeks and a sheen at his throat, and the sight sends a wave of heat through her. His chest rises and falls quickly now, the rhythm near enough that she can feel the brush of it against her own.

“A–am… Am I d-doing this r–right?”

Branwen means to answer, but all that comes out is a low hum. Her hand slides another inch lower along his back, steadying him, yes… But also because she can’t help herself. The movement earns the smallest hitch of breath from him, barely a sound, but enough to make her whole body feel suddenly too aware, too alive.

When they reach the entrance to the tack room, Branwen thinks the

awkward rhythm might finally settle… and then Jonas misjudges a step. His foot catches the edge of a crate, and he stumbles backward.

The hand at his lower back instinctively stiffens, her arm snaking further along his body, steadying him before he can fall too dramatically. His body presses into hers, warm and pliant, and the sudden closeness steals her breath for a second. His face is just inches from hers, eyes wide, lashes trembling, the redness of his cheeks deepening.

“I—I’m—sorry!” He squeaks out, voice tight and caught in surprise and embarrassment.

“You’ll be fine,” She murmurs, her hand firm at his back. Her palm presses lightly, feeling the subtle shift of muscle under the fabric of his shirt, “Just… trust me.”

He inhales sharply, the sound a small and tremulous thing, “Y–yes… I… I d–do,” He whispers, though the words are far softer than confidence. His arms hover awkwardly, not quite knowing where to rest, not wanting to break the moment.

The hands still entwined with one another begin to feel… awfully sweaty.

Branwen’s gaze drops to his face, memorizing the tense set of his jaw, the way his lips part slightly, the way his dark eyes search hers with that quiet mixture of trust and nerves. There’s a vulnerability there, so stark it makes her ache.

“We’re really bad at dancing,” She chuckles softly, though heat rushes to her face, “We both have two left feet.”

Jonas shifts then, leaning against her a little, the faint brush of his chest and shoulders pressing into her. His hand on her shoulder twitches, before sliding slightly down to hold onto her bicep. His gaze becomes half-lidded.

“M–maybe… But I-I’m not fa–f-falling again… Am I?” He asks, a nervous half-smile tugging at his lips.

“No,” She murmurs, almost a whisper, “Not while I’ve got you.”

For a long moment, they simply linger like that, suspended between motion and stillness. Light flickers, catching the soft sheen of his hair, the gentle curve of his jaw, the faint tremor in his hands. His eyes find hers again, dark and searching, and for the first time she notices how complete he feels in her arms—small, trusting, and entirely present.

Another beat passes, and neither moves. Neither speaks. The space is dense with unspoken words, shared warmth, and that thin, taut thread of desire that neither dares follow yet.

Branwen’s jaw flexes. She can feel every inch of where they touch—her arm around his lower back, his fingers curled around her arm, the heat of him seeping through her clothes. The air feels different now, charged, thinner somehow.

Jonas’s smile wavers for a moment, “You’re… you’re st–still h-holding me,” He whispers.

“I know,” She says, and it comes out low and rough-edged. Her pulse thrums in her ears, “Should I let go?”

Jonas's gaze flickers from her mouth to her eyes and back again, the movement so slight it might have been imagined. When he speaks, his voice is barely there. It's thin, trembling, like something pulled straight from the center of his chest.

"N–no," The word catching halfway through, "P-please don't."

It's not command, nor resistance. It's a *plea.* Something soft and stripped bare. The sound of it hits her low, where want and ache blur together into something unsteady. His breath hitches halfway through *please,* the vowel dragged out just enough that it sounds more like surrender than speech.

The way he says it— *Fuck, fuck, fuck*— it unravels her.

Branwen's chest feels like it's splintering open from the inside. Every muscle in her body goes tight, her pulse thrumming in her throat and ringing in her ears. She hadn't quite realized until now just how much she's been holding herself back, how carefully she's kept the edges of her want contained. But Jonas's voice— so small, so careful, so full of trust— shatters that restraint with effortless precision.

She can *feel* the sound of him, the way it trembles through the space between them. It's the kind of softness that isn't weakness at all, but something braver, an unguarded and wordless offering.

Her breath stutters. She unconsciously holds him just a little tighter, and she becomes even more painfully aware of every inch of him pressed against her. Gods, and the way he's looking at her now as if she's the only thing keeping him upright.

“M–miss… Br–B-Branwen…”

He whispers her name, and it’s enough to make her forget every good intention she ever had.

“Jonas,” Her own voice breaks on his name.

Those shy brown eyes lift once more to hers. Branwen’s mouth opens, but no words come. She doesn’t know what she could possibly say to him now. Her fingers curl against the small of his back, feeling the fine, unsteady quiver beneath his shirt.

“Y–you can,” He says finally, each syllable faltering but firming at the end. His gaze steadies, dark and full of something new, something brave, “If… if you w–want to.”

The air goes still. The world seems to narrow to the sound of their breathing, the slow thrum of her pulse, the faint rustle of straw beneath their boots. The rest of the stable falls away.

Branwen leans in before she knows she’s decided to move. Her gaze moves along his cheek and the curve of his jaw, and her heart feels too big for her chest. She can see the small rise of his throat when he swallows, the quick hitch in his breath as she draws closer. Her nose brushes his, a clumsy, searching touch, and he trembles in her hands.

Then he tilts his chin up, just barely. The distance between them vanishes.

The kiss is barely a kiss at first. A soft, uncertain press of lips, the kind that could still be mistaken for accident or impulse. But then he

exhales against her mouth, a small and shuddering sound, and she feels it right through her ribs. She makes a sound in answer, something raw and half-swallowed, and everything in her goes molten. Their lips meet again in a fragile, trembling press that feels at once like falling and finding something she didn't know she'd lost. It's awkward and unsure, their noses bumping slightly, but it's real. His lips are warm and softer than she expected, and it sends a shiver through her whole body.

Jonas's hand tightens on her arm; hers slides higher along his back, up between his shoulders, anchoring him against her. He tastes faintly of flour and tea, and there's a sweetness in it that almost hurts.

When they finally part, it's only by a breath. His eyes are soft and unfocused, lashes lowered, lips still parted like he's trying to remember how to breathe. Branwen can feel the shape of his heartbeat against her chest, quick and stuttering. She realizes she's still holding him as if he might vanish if she lets go.

"Jonas…" She starts, then pauses. It feels clumsy in her mouth, too rough for the moment, "I— I shouldn't have done that. I mean—" Her throat tightens, "I shouldn't have… taken liberties."

His brow furrows, still hazy, "L–liberties?"

She swallows, feeling suddenly foolish and very aware of her own hands still on him, "It's not proper. You're… Your virtue…" Her gaze flicks to his mouth again before she forces it away, "You're meant to keep that sort of thing for your betrothed. Or at least for someone who __"

Branwen cuts herself off, hearing how ridiculous it sounds even as she says it, "Godsdammit," She mutters under her breath, a half-laugh bubbling up, "Listen to me. I sound like your brother. Virtue, and I

probably would have said some bullshite about decorum— I swear I heard his voice coming out of my own mouth for a second there."

Jonas blinks, his confusion melting into shy amusement, "B–but… Y-you're… ap–apologizing?"

Her face heats, "Maybe."

"F–for k–kissing me?"

Branwen groans quietly and tips her head back, exhaling through her nose, "Don't you start. It was a moment of weakness."

"Th–then I'll ap–pologize too."

"Huh? What for?"

He hesitates, eyes flicking up to hers again, warm and shy, "F–for liking it."

That undoes her completely. A startled laugh escapes before she can stop it, and the sound seems to break something open between them. Jonas starts to laugh too, and the moment softens around the edges.

Branwen shakes her head, still smiling, "Gods, what a pair we make."

He grins a little wider, cheeks pink, "I'll ha-have to m–mention it in my l–letter to E-Eliam. *'D–dear Brother, to–t-today I was k–kissed by a*

tack room. I'm s–still recovering.'"

She huffs out a chuckle that sounds almost like a gasp, "You'd give him a fit."

"P–probably."

The laughter fades, but the warmth doesn't. The distance between them feels too small again, charged and tender. He's still in her arms, still breathing quick and shallow against her. She sees it again, how he looks at her, something so open and full of want. It hits her like a blow to the ribs.

The heat under her trousers pulsates. *Shite,* she might start thinking of that blasted medical tome again.

Branwen's smile falters, her voice roughening to a whisper, "Bold Jonas really is trouble, you know that?"

Jonas's reply is barely audible, his breath brushing her skin, "M–maybe. But s–so are you."

It's all the permission either of them needs.

This time when she leans in, it's slower, surer. Jonas meets her halfway, lips parting with quiet, unpractised eagerness. The kiss deepens, less hesitant now but still trembling at the edges. He clings to her shirt, his fingers bunching the fabric at her back, and she can feel him melt against her with a soft, involuntary sound that steals the last of her restraint. They're no longer holding hands; her free palm goes to join the other at his lower back.

The world narrows to the space between their mouths, the press of his body, and the unsteady rhythm of shared breath.

Their mouths meet again, this time with a quiet urgency that steals her breath. It's not practiced or even graceful. Jonas kisses her like he's still learning how, tentative and eager all at once. His nose bumps hers, their teeth nearly catch, and she lets out a soft, helpless laugh against his mouth before kissing him harder, guiding him through it. The little noise he makes when she slips her tongue in is *delightful.*

Jonas makes another small, startled sound when her hand slides further down, more a sigh than anything else. His fingers tighten in her shirt, clutching and unsure of what to do with himself. She feels the tremor in him, feels how every touch seems to both ground and unravel him.

"Miss B–Branwen," He mumbles between kisses, breath shaking, "I… I d–don't kn–know what I'm d–doing."

Her lips brush the words right off his mouth, "You're doing fine."

It's the last thing either of them manage to say before it all blurs into heat and motion.

Jonas shifts against her, seemingly following instinct rather than rhythm, and when he leans too far into her, she catches him again— Only this time she doesn't stop. Her arm hooks around his waist, her other hand gripping the back of his thigh, and she lifts him easily, as though it's the most natural thing in the world. He gasps, an elated sound that breaks into a shaky laugh, and his legs come around her waist without hesitation. His fingers continue clutching at the fabric of her shirt, knuckles white. She can feel his heartbeat hammering

through the thin cotton against her chest.

Their mouths find each other again, clumsy and hungry, and it's dizzying. The taste of him, the sound of his breath, the heat where their bodies press together. She feels the weight of him in her arms, light but solid, and the trust he so readily gives her makes her even dizzier.

Branwen moves until his back meets the wooden frame beside the tack room door. The door, left slightly ajar, gives way with a soft creak as she presses forward, still kissing him, still lost in the momentum of it. The faint thud as Jonas's back meets the wall is swallowed by the rasp of their breathing.

She braces him there, hands steady at his hips as the legs around her waist loosen and falter for a moment. Her whole world narrows to him and only him. His trembling fingers at her shoulders and the small sounds he makes between kisses.

[image]

When Branwen finally pulls back, just barely, their breaths mingle in the inch of space between them. His lips are swollen, his eyes dazed and bright.

She studies him, trying to catch her breath and find her voice again, “You alright?”

Jonas nods, though the motion is slow and unconvincing, “I… I th–think so,” He manages, the words slurring with awe more than stutter, “J–j–just… dizzy.”

Her mouth curves, equal parts fond and aching.

“Good. Me too.”

He laughs softly, still catching his breath while his hands still grip the back of her shirt as if afraid she'll disappear.

Branwen finally exhales, her forehead resting briefly against his. The seconds stretch, soft and trembling around the edges. Then, with quiet care, she lowers him back onto his feet. His legs are unsteady when they touch the ground, his hands sliding down to rest uncertainly at her sides. For a while, neither of them speak. The silence hums with the echo of what just passed between them. The air smells distinctly of sweat now and a nearby lantern flickers, throwing slow-moving shadows along the wall.

Jonas looks up at her through his lashes, "I r–really hope th–t-that was o–okay."

"It was more than okay."

Her voice is rough, full of things she doesn't yet give voice to. He smiles, shy and dazed, and she watches the flush still colouring his throat, the way his chest rises and falls too fast. Outside, one of the horses shifts in its stall, the faint sound of hooves against wood. The world creeps back in, but only barely.

They stand there, breathing each other's air, hearts still racing, knowing the line between them has changed for good.

At last, Jonas glances sideways, his lips still curved in a faint, wondering smile, "I–I'm g–going to b–be th–thinking about that for a long t–time."

Branwen's answering smile is soft and unguarded, "Yeah. So will I."

A pause follows— long enough for the air to turn thick again— and then, in the smallest, most mortifying voice imaginable, she says, “I hope we can… do that again sometime.”

Gods, what is *wrong* with her.

She wants to haul the words back with both hands, but they’re already hanging there, bright and helpless between them. She feels her face heat up further, which she frankly didn’t think was possible considering how she’s fucking *burning*.

It doesn’t help that Jonas looks shyly pleased with himself, “I—I’d l-like that,” He says, eyes darting to her mouth before quickly away again.

Her heart skips a beat at that. To keep her hands occupied, Branwen takes his hand before she can talk herself out of it. Her thumb brushes lightly over the red cord at his wrist.

“I thought this would’ve come off with all that… ah—” She huffs, a half-smile tugging at her mouth, “Enthusiasm.”

Jonas’s breath leaves him in a quiet laugh, that soft, boyish sound that always unravels her. His fingers twitch under hers, “It’s t–tied better than it looks.”

“Guess it really is lucky, then.”

He hums in agreement, gaze now fixed on her fingers. She means to

drop his hand, to make the moment lighter, but instead she hears herself say, “So, then. D’you think the fair folk have opinions about—” She waves a hand between them, cheeks still warming as she clears her throat awkwardly, “—what we just did?”

Jonas blinks, and his mouth twitches, “They m–might,” He says at last, “Th–there’s a… a s–saying. A–about things like th–that.”

Branwen tilts her head, trying to read him, “Oh?”

He blinks quickly, eyes darting down to the cord again as if the words might be hiding there, “Th–they s–say if two people k–kiss under the same roof where a horse sleeps…” He falters, breath catching; she can see the next word fight its way up his throat, “…th–then the l–” He swallows, tries again, voice barely more than a whisper, “Th–then the l–love l–lasts.”

The word lands square in her chest, sharp and breath-stealing. Her fingers tighten on the red cord before drifting to her heart, as if she can calm its sudden hammering.

He looks instantly mortified, colour blooming high on his cheeks, “I m–mean, it’s j–just what s–some people s–say,” He stammers, ducking his head, “O–old st–stable talk.”

Branwen huffs a shaky laugh, “...Sounds like you’re making it up.”

His mouth quirks, still pink but with a flicker of pride beneath the bashfulness. “Sw–swear I’m not. M–my g–grandmother said the st–able’s the f–fairest place to m–make a promise. N–nothing hidden, not e–e-even the air.”

“Then the fair folk had better be paying attention,” She mutters, letting her fingertips linger over the cord, almost afraid to let go.

Jonas’s eyes lift, bright and shy, glancing at her chest, then back to her face, “I th–think they are.”

Her hand twitches. They stand like that for a while, fingers loosely intertwined, both pretending not to notice that neither wants to move. The night hums around them. Crickets, distant thunder, the faint rustling of a chimbletail in the bushes. It all feels impossibly far away.

The word *love* still hangs between them, warm and weighty.

Branwen exhales slowly, feeling the ache of wanting and not-quite-having settle beneath her ribs. Gods, she ought to say it— That she loves him. The thought is absurd and reckless. They’ve just kissed in a stable; she’s bleeding, half undone, and still she can’t stop thinking it. She’s afraid of the softness of it, of what it might bring.

Eventually, she clears her throat.

“You should get back before someone starts wondering where everyone’s favourite servant has gone. I’ll walk you back. Wouldn’t want a ghost to spook you in the dark.”

He nods, but doesn’t let go until she does. Branwen doesn’t miss the flash of disappointment on his face.

The walk back to the main house is slow and unhurried. Their shoulders brush now and then, and though neither says much, the silence feels companionable, like something shared rather than empty.

When they reach the servants' door, Jonas lingers, glancing at her when the dazed, half-smile returns.

"Th–thank you… for w–walking m-me, M–Miss Branwen," He says and Branwen feels her mouth curve in return.

She replies with a wry edge to her voice, "You're still calling me *Miss?"*

"I— I d–don't know what e–else to call you."

"You could try just *Branwen,* you know," Her smirk tilts, just a little wicked, "Or Bran, if you're feeling like Bold Jonas."

That earns her a helpless little sound, halfway between a laugh and a groan. He ducks his head, the tips of his ears pink, "I… I d–don't think I c–could."

"No?" She tilts her head, watching him squirm and enjoying every second of it, "Even after you've had your hands all over me?"

His breath catches, and she can see the memory flicker across his face — The kiss, the closeness, the way she'd lifted him like he weighed nothing. His voice, when it comes, is small but certain, "S–still feels r–right. C–calling you *Miss."*

The amusement thins into something far more fragile. The way he says it isn't stiff or dutiful; it's reverent. Like a secret. Like he's offering her something wordless and trembling, a kind of quiet surrender she doesn't know how to carry. Just like when he washed her feet. It steals the breath from her. She's spent half her life being

barked at or obeyed, and now here he is— *not* obeying, not really, but choosing it, choosing her. There's a difference she can feel all the way down to her bones.

The sound of *Miss* in his mouth isn't a title anymore. It's an endearment.

"You really don't fight fair, do you?"

He glances up through his lashes, "Y–you st–started it."

"Don't remind me."

The night air hums around them, cool and damp, and she finds herself absurdly aware of how near he still stands. She just watches him— This awkward, brave, wonderful man who somehow trusts her enough to tremble in her hands.

She exhales slowly, "Alright, go to bed. Before I make a fool of myself again."

He lingers, then gives a small and shaky nod, "Y–yes. G–g-goodnight, M–Miss Branwen."

The word now makes her spine tingle. Not because of what it means, but because of *how* he says it. Soft, reverent, almost shy, as though it belongs to no one else in the world.

She bites the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling too wide,

“Goodnight, Jonas.”

He turns half toward the servant door, hand lifting to the latch, then pauses. Maybe it’s something to do with that *Shadow Crossing,* or something similar to it. Regardless, something in the action tugs at her. Without thought, Branwen steps forward and presses a quick kiss to his cheek.

Jonas freezes. His breath catches audibly, and all she can see is the stunned red creeping up his throat.

“Now go,” She murmurs, her own face burning.

He swallows, still smiling and now looking dazed, “Y–yes, M–Miss,” He manages again, softer this time and almost breathless.

She huffs out a laugh, helplessly fond, and watches as he slips inside, the door closing with a quiet click. The courtyard feels larger without him in it, the air still humming. Branwen touches her fingers to her lips, then lets them fall. The ache in her chest feels gentler and steadier now. A simple want and desire.

Branwen exhales, the ghost of that startled warmth still on her lips. Then she turns toward the darkened yard, and starts for the stables.

The morning comes grey and still, the kind of dull light that never quite feels like daybreak. Branwen wakes before the first bell, the memory of last night still thrumming faintly beneath her ribs. For once, she doesn’t mind the chill that clings to the air; she feels strangely alive.

She dresses quickly, checks the flow of her bleeding and is pleased to realize she's near the end of it, and pulls her hair into a rough braid. She's ready to meet the noise and smell of the returning horses, the kennels soon to stir. When she opens her door, though, she stops short.

A folded slip of paper is pinned neatly to the wood, her name written in a hand she knows too well.

She pulls it free, thumb brushing over the seal before she unfolds it. Only one line waits inside, written in precise, elegant ink:

Please report to The Lady's office at your earliest convenience.

The words sit heavy in her palm. The quiet hum of morning fades around her, replaced by the slow, cold prickle of unease climbing up her neck.

She stares at the note a moment longer, then exhales, steadying herself. Whatever last night had been, whatever warmth still lingers in her chest—

It's about to meet daylight.

Chapter End Notes

Artwork by my incredibly talented sister!! (That's literally just how she wanted to be credited lmao. Be sure to praise her in the comments though 🧌🧌🧌)

I had honestly thought about writing smut here but I figured

Jonas and Branwen aren't the type to fuck after their first kiss so I decided to make her on her period lol. But if you're dying to read awkward virgin smut, I do fully intend to write them exploring that aspect of their relationship in a one-shot after the main story is finished. Eliam and The Lady will also be getting dedicated one-shots for themselves too.

Also, if you've come this far along, I'd like to assume you liked this story so far. If you're so inclined, you can support me here: https://ko-fi.com/sanguia

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Branwen stands outside The Lady's office as if the old oak door personally offended her.

Maud, planted like a gargoyle beside it, folds her arms with a steely look of someone who has been distributing summons far too much. Her apparent loyalty to the estate would be impressive if Branwen didn't currently find it extremely aggravating. She doesn't look at the Housekeeper-General so much as *through* her, jaw set with eyes narrowed to hostile slits.

If Maud notices the daggers being stared into her skull, she pretends not to. She only lifts her chin, sniffing in that *I-run-the-houseway* manner that's beginning to make Branwen's teeth grind. Perhaps Maud's loyalty is the type of thing only a Freeholder who had been given a last name can achieve. Not that Branwen would know anything about *that.*

Branwen shifts her weight. She is still tired from the night before—well, not *tired.* Just… unsettled. Her mouth tingles with the memory of the kiss, and every time her thoughts land on Jonas her stomach does something traitorous and fluttery. She had barely slept. Woke up before dawn. Found that summons tacked onto her door. Then she checked on the mares twice. Splashed freezing water on her face three times. None of it helped.

Branwen also crosses her arms. She's not worried. Not exactly. The Lady is precise, but not cruel. Still, being summoned before breakfast is never an omen of anything good.

Maud clears her throat, “The Lady will see you now.”

Branwen steps inside without acknowledging her. But she does briefly imagine throttling her with an apron string.

The office is dim. Heavy drapes block most of the morning light and the air smells faintly of lavender water and last night’s perfume clinging to silk. Papers are stacked in dangerous little towers on the desk, the usual sort of organized chaos Branwen has seen every time she’s been in this office. She tries not to look at the beast mounted above the hearth. *Fourth Colonial Hunt,* she vaguely recalls. It makes her feel impossibly small, as do the papers discussing something in the colonies, so she keeps her gaze firmly planted on The Lady who sits behind the desk.

The Lady sits with impeccable posture even while she looks like death politely reanimated and dressed in fine brocade.

Her silver-streaked hair is braided neatly, but her complexion has gone the delicate shade of wax-paper. One gloved hand rubs slowly at her temple, index finger making small, practiced circles like she has long experience with headaches of the prestigious variety.

Branwen had heard the Gala lasted until nearly dawn, which means there was no time in between the Gala and now sitting in this office to seemingly reprimand her. The woman likely didn’t get a wink of sleep. The Lady didn’t usually overindulge, but last night had been… Something else, apparently. Even Branwen caught the whispers drifting down the servant corridors. Too much wine. Too many cloying nobles. Too many women insisting The Lady dance *“just one more time.”* She’s even heard mumbling here and there about The Lady’s visiting gentlemen. Someone had allegedly invited prostitutes to the Gala. Quite the scandal.

Which means Branwen must begrudgingly be on her best behaviour, lest The Lady has little to no patience this morning.

The Lady inhales once— regal even in suffering— and lifts her gaze.

“Marshal,” Her voice is a low scrape, not quite hoarse but also not steady, “Close the door. Quietly.”

Branwen obeys, shutting it with a care she doesn’t grant many things, then stands before the desk with hands clasped behind her back.

The Lady massages her brow again. She then straightens her gloves with slow, economical movements, then gestures at the chair opposite her desk, “Sit. I will be brief.”

Branwen sits, though stiffly. Her mind keeps circling back to Jonas, with his hesitant hands and flushed cheeks and that stunned, breathless look he’d had after she kissed him. She tries to shove the memory away. Not here. Not in front of The Lady.

The Lady watches her for a long moment— Too perceptive by far.

“You look unsettled.”

Branwen schools her expression into something approaching flat professionalism, though her jaw twitches, “...Just a long night, my Lady.”

“Mm,” The Lady rests both elbows on the desk and presses her fingers together, “I am in no mood for half-truths today, Marshal. But I am also in no mood to extract the whole of it.”

Before Branwen can make much of a response to that, The Lady exhales and closes her eyes a moment longer than normal. Another flash of the hangover betraying itself through her immaculate posture.

“I require your assistance,” She says finally, “Something arose at the Gala last night. Something I must speak to you about before the rest of the household fully rouses.”

Branwen straightens, and relief floods her so swiftly it nearly makes her sway. No mention of Jonas. Not even a hint. For one wild, foolish second she clings to that possibility the way a drowning woman grips driftwood. Perhaps this summons is not about last night at all. Perhaps The Lady truly did call her here only for business. Work. Politics. Anything but—

She latches onto that thought with feverish determination.

Don’t mention him. Don’t mention him. Don’t mention him…

She repeats it like a prayer she has never believed in until this moment, and Branwen briefly decides that if this meeting ends without reference to the stables, she will consider the existence of a god or two. Generous ones, even.

“Of course, my Lady,” She replies, her voice a touch too rigid.

The Lady’s posture sharpens slightly, the fog of her hangover thinning.

She begins to resemble herself again, if only for a little while.

“But first,” The Lady adds, tone dry as old parchment, “Should you feel the overwhelming urge to glare at Maud again… do restrain yourself. I do not have the stamina for a household spat before breakfast.”

Heat flares across Branwen’s ears.

She hadn’t thought The Lady noticed. Gods. If she is being chastised for *that,* then perhaps this truly has nothing to do with Jonas, which is its own kind of humiliation, sharp and unnecessary.

“…Yes. Understood,” She mutters.

The Lady rubs her temple again, “Good. Now. Let us begin. I was approached by Lady Merinne of the Outer Council.”

Branwen lifts a brow. She has no idea what happened at the Gala beyond the rumours whispered through the servants’ corridors and from the sounds of nobles stumbling home at dawn, the clatter of too many shoes on the marble. Lady Merinne is not a name she recognizes, but The Lady’s tone makes clear that the woman holds weight.

“There is a matter concerning witness reports of mirewolves along our southern boundary,” The Lady continues, clipped and professional now, “Something is driving them out of the hills. They attacked a courier. Lady Merinne wants evidence, and she wants it before the month is out.”

Branwen leans forward, relief swelling to something absurd. She will take *mirewolves* over discussing last night a hundred times over.

"I can survey the ridge paths—"

"You will," The Lady cuts in, "But that is not the only part that concerns me at this precise moment." She lowers her hands, fingers steepled, "Before I dispatch the Hunting Marshal on such a matter, I need to be certain that her attentions are not… divided."

Branwen goes very still. Her heartbeat thuds once, a heavy and sickening blow against her ribs. The fragile relief she'd been clinging to evaporates like mist in sunlight.

"My Lady," She begins carefully, choosing each word with the precision of a woman stepping through a snare field, "I assure you—"

"Oh, spare me," The Lady murmurs. Two fingers return to her temple to massages it, tired and irritable, "I am hungover, not blind. And while I normally have no interest whatsoever in the romantic tangles of those beneath me, I cannot have indulgences or ill-timed… entanglements interfering with matters of security."

Indulgences. *Entanglements.* Her mind leaps immediately to Maud, absurdly imagining the woman lurking behind a half-open storeroom door. Or Esther, nervous little thing, leaving the stables late last night; perhaps she had turned back for her gloves, she might have caught sight of— Fuck.

Or gods, if Jonas let something slip. Or if Branwen herself had been too obvious, too loose with her expression.

Before she can stop herself, before she even remembers that The Lady has *not* actually said one single word about Jonas, Branwen blurts out to herself:

"We were alone in the stables. Entirely alone."

Silence. A thick, heavy, humiliating silence.

The Lady gives Branwen a look so flat, so pointedly unimpressed, that it could level a city.

"I had not said anything about the stables."

Branwen wants to die. *Truly*. Right there on the expensive rug. She could vanish into the floorboards and consider it a mercy. Her ears burn. Her stomach plummets. Her palms sweat. Every mistake she has ever made in her life seems to gather behind her eyes like an accusing choir. If she flung herself off the balcony, she thinks dimly, it might be less painful than sitting in this chair at this very moment.

The Lady exhales, a long and frayed breath, and waves one hand in a small, cutting arc.

"Well," She says dryly, "Since you are so *eager* to offer up an unsolicited confession, let us dispense with the preamble. Marshal, you and Jonas spent an inordinate amount of time together during Covenant Day."

Her voice is not raised, but it lands like a hammer.

“You disappeared for hours. You were seen leaving the south courtyard at dusk, walking far too close for propriety, and if you imagine for even a moment that no one noticed—”

She pauses, letting the silence stretch.

Then, with surgical precision:

“—then you have a very inflated sense of your own subtlety.”

Branwen’s mouth goes dry. Her shoulders tense painfully. She stares at a knot in the wooden floorboard as though she could crawl inside it. *Shite,* she is going to be sick. Or faint. Or both.

The Lady reaches into a drawer and withdraws a slim, leather-bound booklet. It has an indigo cover, gilt lettering, the spine worn from decades of self-righteous use.

The Lady’s Book of Domestic Order, 1877.

Branwen has only ever seen it in passing, an object housekeepers quote with religious fervour.

The Lady flips it open with one elegant, impatient thumb, “I’m sure I needn’t remind you that it states, quite plainly…” She finds the page and reads with crisp disdain, *“‘No unions of affection shall be pursued without the express permission of the Lady of the House.’”*

The book snaps shut with a soft, lethal click.

Branwen's stomach twists so hard she thinks she might double over. Still, she forces her voice level, steady, and frustratingly enough, *obedient.*

"With respect, Jonas and I—"

"—have already crossed the threshold from idle familiarity into something else," The Lady cuts in again, "Do not insult us both by pretending otherwise. As I said, you are not subtle. Jonas is *especially* not subtle."

That last part lands like a blade between Branwen's ribs.

Her mind traitorously flashes to Jonas's face last night, the soft astonishment in his eyes, the tentative way he'd leaned in before she kissed him a second time. That shy, impossibly sweet sound he'd tried to hide in his throat. The way he'd looked at her as though she'd hung a moon inside the rafters.

Her heart stutters. She grips her knees to keep still.

"My work has not suffered," She says weakly, almost whispering.

"Yet," The Lady replies, "And the rules exist for a reason. They are preventative, not consolatory. They exist so that lapses never occur, not so that we may soothe ourselves after they already have."

Her tone doesn't sharpen, but something in it clicks into alignment, the way a trap does when it's fully set. Branwen feels the shift

immediately. It presses along her spine, urges her into straighter posture, makes her hands tighten on her knees.

Branwen forces her jaw to unclench, “We are—”

“—possibly going to get distracted,” The Lady interrupts again, tapping a pen sharply against the desk, “At a time when I cannot afford distraction,” She leans back slightly, “There are supposedly mirewolves about, Marshal. I cannot have you indulging in trysts in some corner while one of those creatures takes off with an unsuspecting servant.”

She continues, “Fraternization is not forbidden out of prudishness. It is forbidden because it fractures discipline. A household of this stature is expected to be immaculate. Orderly, impeccable, unmarred by private indulgence.”

Branwen keeps her eyes lowered. It’s safer that way, but her pulse thuds hard in her throat. She feels nine again, being scolded by a village elder for climbing rooftops.

“My position is not ornamental. I hold land grants. Commission ships. Oversee textile mills that employ hundreds. My judgement is sought by magistrates and councilwomen alike. I cannot afford even the suggestion that my servants conduct themselves improperly under my roof.”

Her voice never rises. It doesn’t need to.

“I— I understand that your position—” Branwen weakly attempts. Unsurprisingly, she is interrupted again.

“You understand barely a fraction. Not by fault. It is simply the nature of your station.”

Branwen bites the inside of her cheek and forces herself not to bristle. It’s not an insult; it’s simply true. She supposes she knows as much about Dominion politics as she does about embroidery— bits overheard and overseen, nothing more.

“I cannot afford the perception of disorder. Not when the Preceptor-General herself defers to me in arbitration. My estate must be beyond reproach. When people whisper about the conduct of my servants, they whisper about *me,”* Her gaze sharpens, “Which, again, is why two unwed servants conducting private attachments in unsupervised spaces is a problem. Surely I needn’t spell out the optics any further.”

“You, Marshal,” She adds, “Carry my authority into the field. Jonas carries my name through every corridor he walks. Their comportment,” A flick of her fingers, “Reflects mine.”

The Lady draws another ledger forward, the *House Register of Conduct,* its spine stiff and its ink fresh.

“You must grasp the seriousness of this. I am within my rights to have you both dismissed without reference. Today. This morning. Before the kitchens finish boiling the first kettle.”

Branwen’s chest tightens. She forces herself not to flinch.

“It would ruin you both,” The Lady continues, matter-of-fact, “Dismissal without reference follows a servant everywhere. No lady of quality will hire someone whose last service ended in scandal. And certainly not when that scandal happened at *my* estate.”

Branwen's mouth feels dry, "...I understand, my Lady."

"Good. Because I have no desire to enact such measures. But I will not tolerate disorder," A long, slow breath leaves The Lady, the kind that suggests her head still throbs faintly from last night's Gala. She presses her fingertips to her temple for a heartbeat before continuing, "Now. To avoid further impropriety or even the *appearance* of it… reassignment may be necessary."

"Reassignment?" Branwen's pulse spikes.

"Yes," The Lady turns a page as though flipping through the thoughts in her mind, "Jonas may be moved into attached domestic service within the stables and kennels. *Permanently*. It would resolve any rumours that he spends too much time there and not enough in the main house regardless of Maud's chore chart, since that would now be his *official* post. No one could imply he was loitering or dawdling or favouring locations he ought not. He would simply be fulfilling his duties where he is assigned."

A pause. Then, lightly:

"And… it would align his work with where he so clearly prefers to spend his time."

Branwen forgets how to breathe.

It isn't the reassignment itself that unsettles her. It's everything it signals. Jonas is steady in the house now; he has carved out a rhythm there and told her outright he would rather stay at the estate than be dragged back to whatever future his brother imagines for him. Moving

him from that stability and placing him somewhere new— even if it's the stables and kennels he's grown comfortable in— would brand him as someone who'd misstepped. An *"attached domestic"* suggests impropriety. It suggests punishment. It invites whispers that men do not easily shake, especially when everyone already mutters about favouritism. Reassignments for men are rare, and when they happen, people assume there was a failing. Jonas would carry that quietly, she knows. But would it push him back into shrinking in on himself, apologizing for nothing, letting the likes of Fenn or Merrill dig at him again? Would he slip into that old, brittle caution, afraid that even breathing wrong might draw The Lady's scrutiny a second time?

And the idea of him believing he'd earned censure for being near *her* makes something inside her bristle.

"No," She says quickly, "My Lady, that— that isn't necessary. Jonas is doing excellent work in the house."

The Lady lifts one silver eyebrow, "I am offering a solution. Yet you would rather your *lover* not be reassigned to be closer to you?"

Branwen feels it, sharp and disorienting, a punch of heat straight to her ribs. *Lover.* Jonas is her lover. Hearing it aloud feels shocking and dizzying. But she forces her throat to work.

"That is not— we are not—" She grips the edge of her chair. Her jaw clenches hard enough to ache. She can't seem to line her words up straight, "Jonas and I do not— we are not—"

"Except," The Lady interrupts, tone bone-dry, "For apparently having a private moment in the stables last evening."

Branwen's mouth snaps shut.

Her ears burn. Her stomach drops again and her pulse stumbles into a panicked, uneven rhythm.

The Lady continues, “Reassignment would offer him protection and supervision. It is the most logical solution. It is about protecting him from rumour. From implication. From the way society treats unwed men who appear too familiar with women above them.”

When Branwen can only stare at her, The Lady actually snorts.

“Reassignment would place him under a matron’s domestic oversight — Yours, in this case.” She gestures faintly, “That is entirely proper *if* he is to be understood as a man on the path to binding himself to a woman. It becomes a tidy narrative. A respectable narrative. A pre-courtship arrangement, if you will. I hope that you are beginning to follow, Marshal.”

The air in the room shifts. Branwen blinks.

She had not expected that turn.

The Lady lays it out with merciless clarity, “But without such a narrative? Without an impending union? It is scandal. For an unwed male, becoming attached domestic to a woman he is frequently seen with— *without* the intention of marriage— would be ruinous,” Her voice sharpens to a fine blade, “He would appear… Disordered. A man without propriety or matronly guidance. He would be no better than a prostitute. And my estate is no brothel. If he is not wed, it is far more logical to have him dismissed.”

Branwen inhales like she’s been stabbed. *Whore* is the more crass term

that would no doubt follow Jonas… because it already has. She can still hear his broken whisper, the way he'd forced the words out as if they were knives in his mouth.

"They… they… c-called m-me… a w-w…a… uh… w-wh… s-something… w-with y-you… for… f-favours."

"And I presume," The Lady adds coolly, "That you do not want Jonas mistaken for… Well. The easy sort of man."

Branwen's vision flickers. Because gods— *of course.* Of course The Lady is right. Reassignment only protects Jonas if everyone believes it is the precursor to an official union. Without that? It is the opposite of protection. It is effectively branding him unchaste.

All this because of a fucking kiss, Branwen forces her jaw to unclench. Her voice comes out hoarse, "My Lady… I do not want him harmed by this. In any way."

The Lady's expression softens, just barely, the faintest thaw of frost, "Then you see the dilemma and its solution."

"I— see the dilemma. The solution is…" Branwen cannot finish. The words lodge like stones in her throat.

The Lady tilts her head, studying her with a faint, almost *wry* amusement, as though Branwen is a child failing to grasp the most obvious answer on an arithmetic slate, "Marshal," She says gently, but with an unmistakable thread of condescension, "You *do* care for him, do you not?"

Branwen's heart punches once against her ribs. Too hard.

She opens her mouth, but The Lady continues, waving a mild hand.

"Your attachment is hardly inscrutable. You spend half your free hours circling each other like nesting birds, and Jonas looks at you with some very apparent adoration. If you intend your affection to continue, then the path is quite clear."

"I—"

The Lady speaks with the sort of patient exasperation used on someone being obstinate for no sensible reason, "Truly, my dear. This is not complicated. A sanctioned courtship leading to a marriage contract solves every difficulty. Jonas's virtue remains intact, both of your reputations become untouchable, I do not have to formally reprimand or dismiss my Hunting Marshal, and the estate does not fall under gossip for harbouring loose men."

She smiles— Small, pleased, and self-assured.

"A win for all involved."

A win.

Branwen almost laughs. Some sharp, half-hysterical sound she barely manages to bite back.

Because in The Lady's neat, orderly world, this is simple. Marriage is a

ledger entry. A box ticked. A problem solved through correct filing.

But in Branwen's chest, panic and disbelief shift like something alive.

She thinks of Jonas's uncertain hands, the way he trembled last night, the way he whispered her name as though afraid it would break if spoken too loudly. He is gentle. Sensitive. Easily overwhelmed. If she so much as touches him too suddenly, he startles like a spooked colt.

And yet they are talking about *marriage?*

After *one* kiss.

It's too fast. It's absurdly fast. It's a runaway cart careening downhill with both of them inside.

Branwen swallows hard, "My Lady… Jonas is— he's a gentle man. He frightens easily. I don't want to… to force him into something he isn't ready for."

She clenches her hands harder against her knees. Because The Lady is not wrong. But she is also not *right.* Marriage— *now*— would surely swallow Jonas whole. It would blindside him. It would knock the ground out from beneath his feet. And Branwen *herself* isn't ready either. She can barely look him in the eye without wanting to either kiss him or flee the room entirely. The thought of a contract, a ceremony, shared quarters—

Her pulse spikes into her ears.

The Lady sighs delicately, mistaking Branwen's spiralling for mere stubbornness, "Truly, Marshal, for someone so capable in the field, you are being remarkably dramatic about what is ultimately a rather pleasant solution."

"We've only known each for months—"

"Months? How luxurious," The Lady chuckles slightly, before her expression pinches and she touches her temple with two fingers, "Most people of my standing meet their future spouse two, perhaps three times in formal settings before the wedding contract is finalized by their parents. My son met his wife only once before he was married. Once. They spoke for a total of fourteen minutes."

Branwen stares at her. Fourteen minutes. She and Jonas have spoken more than that by accident while mucking out stalls or when she was showing him how to wrap a hound's sprained paw.

"And you say," The Lady says, "That *months* is not long enough?" Her smile turns mild, almost pitying, "Goodness. You two have had more freedom than most nobles receive in their entire courtships."

Pursing her lips together, Branwen heaves a large exhale. The Lady sees this and perhaps views it as dawning horror or panic, and keeps talking as if Branwen is being willfully dense.

"Do not make me repeat everything I had just said. I feel as though I have been speaking in circles. Jonas's position is precarious. I do not wish for my estate to have unsavoury things said of it. Before you protest again, this *is* mercy. I hope you realize that. I would not normally expend this much energy on such a matter. I have six administrators handling trade disputes who haven't received this level of attention from me in months."

Branwen blinks again, unsure whether to feel grateful or sick.

“I do not want to lose my Hunting Marshal,” The Lady adds simply, “Nor do I actually wish to see a promising young man destroyed over impropriety. I am not cruel. Marriage is the logical, efficient solution.”

At this point, Branwen feels like she’s falling down a well. This conversation has *exhausted* her.

The Lady folds her hand neatly atop her ledger, expression cooling back into that composed, immovable mask.

“You should also consider yourself fortunate,” She says lightly, “That my husband was the way that he was.”

The words flick past Branwen like a bird’s shadow— Noticed but not understood, gone before she can shape a question. Her mind is running too fast, tumbling over the sudden weight of *marriage,* of expectation, of Jonas’s soft voice whispering her name in the dark of the stables while she kissed him like a starving thing.

Everything feels too big again. Too loud. Too *soon.*

She forces out, “…Understood, my Lady.”

The Lady nods, satisfied, as if Branwen has finally caught up to the obvious arithmetic of the situation. As if she’s just solved a particularly simple equation.

“Very good. I am pleased we could settle this with so little fuss. Congratulations on your future husband, then.”

Branwen nearly chokes.

The Lady does not notice. Or chooses not to.

“Now,” She says, tone brightening with relief at returning to matters that actually warrant her attention, “Let us speak of the mirewolves.”

As though the previous ten minutes had merely been housekeeping. As though she had not just shoved Branwen’s entire future into a new shape with the ease of rearranging cutlery.

As though marrying Jonas were as simple— and as *trivial*— as ticking a box.

Branwen sits rigid, heart pounding, mind still ringing with the word *husband* long after The Lady has already moved on.

Jonas wakes before the first bell.

He usually does, but this morning he wakes with his hand pressed over his mouth, because he’s smiling— and *giggling*— like a fool, and he’s terrified someone will hear it. For a moment he just lies there on his narrow cot, staring at the low rafters above as though they’re the

only thing keeping him from floating straight into the ceiling, chest full of something warm and dizzying that he keeps trying and failing to calm down.

He kissed her.

No— *she* kissed him.

She kissed me…!

The thought hits him all over again, bright as lightning, and he buries his face in the thin blanket to smother the sound he makes. It doesn't help much. His whole body feels made of warm, trembling sugar. As though one sharp word, one glance, might make him crack. If anyone else in the men's quarters woke to see him like this, he'd simply die. Die instantly. Fold in half and perish.

He turns his face into the lumpy pillow and breathes. There were some days where he woke with dread curled tight in his stomach, especially when Merrill and Fenn made it their mission to make him miserable. The morning meant being behind on chores, voices calling his name, the fear of doing something wrong. But *now*… Today…

Today the world has tilted just an inch. Enough to make everything feel new.

He lifts his fingers to his lips again, as if checking that they're still there. His *first* kiss. He'd always assumed it would be— Well. He'd assumed it would be something stolen. Something embarrassing. Something he'd be scolded for.

Not… that.

Not Branwen's hands in his shirt.

Not the way she'd leaned into him, breath warm, steady and purposeful.

Not the way she picked him up as he kissed him further.

Not the way she'd looked right *at* him afterward, like she was memorizing him.

A shiver ripples down his spine.

He pulls himself upright, feet hitting the cold boards. Dawn is just beginning to smear along the ridge-hills outside the frost-filmed window. Jonas smooths his hair back automatically. It springs up again. He smooths it harder. No good. He tries again anyway, cheeks hot. Of course his hair would misbehave now, today, when the world feels like it's watching him. As though Branwen might stroll past the men's hall door, right this moment, and catch him looking rumpled.

His fingers find the red twine around his wrist. Branwen's twine. The one she tied there during Covenant Day. He touches it gently and reverently. The knot is still neat, the fibre still faintly smelling of the kennels from where she'd cut it. His heart does an embarrassing little flutter at the touch and sight of it.

He laughs under his breath— immediately mortified— and slaps a hand over his mouth.

After he recovers, he dresses as quickly as his trembling hands allow, hiding the red twine underneath his sleeve. Buttons fight him. Ties slip. He fumbles through all of it, praying no one wakes and witnesses his absolute *state.* When he glances up at the tiny cracked mirror over the basin, what he sees nearly knocks his knees out.

He looks like a young man who has been kissed.

Not subtly, either. There's a softness around his eyes, a certain looseness in his mouth, a glow he can't flatten no matter how sternly he tries to school his expression. It's appalling. And wonderful. And terrifying.

He stares at himself another moment.

One of the kinder fair folk must have touched me, he thinks wildly.

It is the only explanation his fluttering heart will accept. Some blessing in the night. Some glamour on his skin. The same uncanny tilt that happens when a charm is half-broken or half-awake. He even checks behind himself in the mirror, expecting a flicker of something that does not belong. *Nothing.* But the feeling remains anyway, the sense that something beautiful and dangerous has brushed against his life and marked it.

He splashes cold water over his face. It does nothing except make him gasp.

Apron tied, hair hopeless, heart still beating itself stupid, Jonas heads toward the servant's corridor. He's fully intent on working, on being normal, on *not* thinking about Branwen's mouth. Her lips on his. Of

her hands around him, picking him up—

Jonas splashes some *more* cold water over his face.

He tries again to not ruminate on her. He has work to do.

He lasts exactly four steps.

Because the moment he imagines her again— her voice, her hands, her broad surety— his mind now drifts helplessly into a quiet, impossible future. One he has rehearsed in his mind for some time now, in small feverish bursts he never dared acknowledge. These imaginings… They simply keep coming back to him.

Thoughts of rising early and making her morning tea. To keep her boots polished and her coats brushed. To move through the quiet spaces of a life built around *her* schedule, her needs, her world. To be the quiet person she could rely on, soft and small in the spaces where she stands broad and sure. To be the one who makes her life easier in every small, invisible way.

Those thoughts alone already make him blush.

But then, unbidden, something gentler and far more frightening curls up through his chest.

Not… merely her helper. Not only her attendant.

Something else. Something he has never dared let himself imagine

fully. His thoughts have brushed the edges of it before, brief and embarrassed, but now with his heart aflutter and his whole body feeling warm and tingly and his lips still craving hers, he finally grasps onto a proper word for it.

Something like… her husband.

The word bursts through him like sunlight cracking open.

His breath catches in his throat. His ears burn so hot they throb. He actually missteps on the old wooden boards, toes catching for half a second because husband? Him? The idea is absurd and enormous and too dear to hold safely. And yet it settles over him like a cloak that fits perfectly, tailored to a shape he hadn't realized he carried.

The thought embarrasses him so deeply he wants to hide his face in his hands, but the feeling doesn't dim. If anything, it grows. He can see it too clearly: himself at her side, not as a servant stealing moments, but as something claimed and welcomed. Himself at her table. Himself in her space— truly in it— where the air would smell like her coat after riding and the tools she keeps so carefully ordered. Not the estate's great hearth. Not a corner borrowed from someone else. A home shaped by her. A life shaped with her.

Jonas swallows hard, dizzy with the sheer sweetness of it. He feels like he could burst into flames from mortification and joy all at once, but gods, he's happy. Ridiculously, deliriously happy.

Marriage had always been an eventual obligation in his mind, the natural end to male training, a matter of being matched to a respectable woman and behaving properly. Something expected. Something inevitable to all boys. A place to submit and keep the peace. He may have had once attached yearning to it as a child, but his stutter stamped it out. But now, he feels this aching sense of

rightness.

With Branwen— He imagines matrimony without fear. He imagines it with hope. He imagines simply taking her hand in front of witnesses and feeling proud rather than cornered. He imagines bending his life toward hers not because he must, but because he wants to. Because the thought of being hers in every ordinary, lawful, domestic way fills him with a happiness that almost hurts.

Jonas presses a hand over his racing heart, trying to quiet it, but he cannot. He doesn't want to.

The thought lingers. It is bright, fragile, and secretly treasured. Jonas forces himself to breathe and pretend he is a sensible person who has not just mentally leapt into an imaginary life with a woman who could toss him over one shoulder like a sack of flour. *Right.* He will simply… do his work. Just like always. He will not think about Branwen's hands. Or her mouth. Or the way she murmured his name like she was tasting it.

He swallows hard, dizzy and grinning despite himself. *Oops.* He's thinking about her again. He tries to school his breathing into something normal, something not foolishly lovestruck, but the effort is hopeless. Every time he blinks, he feels her again, the way she'd touched him like he wasn't breakable at all.

By mid-morning, Jonas is nearly useless.

Well. Emotionally useless.

His hands still know their work. They always do. Muscle memory guides him through the motions with crisp, quiet efficiency: Fold the counterpanes, smooth the corners, shake out the pillows, check the

wainscoting for scuffs, polish the latch, adjust the drapes so the pleats fall straight. His body performs it flawlessly, the way it was trained to.

But his mind? His mind is nowhere near the guest rooms.

It's in the lamplit stables. It's at Branwen's mouth. Again.

Every few minutes a wave of heat climbs his neck, and he has to pause, breathe, and pretend he is thinking about linens instead of her callused hands sliding to his hips last night. He doesn't slip up, he doesn't miss a detail— but goodness, he *feels* distracted, and that alone would be enough to horrify him if he weren't so stupidly happy.

Jonas reaches under a guest bed to retrieve a stray slipper someone dropped the night before, and then his fingers brush paper.

A thin little booklet.

Jonas blinks and draws it out.

The *Genteel Standard.*

His heart sinks with immediate recognition. He hasn't touched one in weeks, not since Branwen began bringing him real books from The Lady's library, heavier volumes with proper bindings and ideas that didn't entirely reduce men to fretful ornaments. He'd started to… forget the magazine existed.

But here it is, placed very neatly, very obviously, exactly where he'd

be the one to find it. For some reason his mind goes to Maud, imagining her watching him like a hawk, searching for any missteps.

He exhales carefully and turns it over in his hands.

This issue's headline curls across the cover in ornate font.

THE GENTEEL STANDARD
Preserving Order, Refinement, and Domestic Harmony since 1661
Issue No. 3,199 — Frost's First Moon Edition

Beneath it, a featured article boxed in floral borders.

FEATURE: "On the Perils of Unrestrained Male Want" — A Caution for Wives, Mothers, and Ladies of Households

Jonas feels the familiar, low-grade nausea he used to get whenever the boys in his training circle were made to copy passages longhand.

He skims the opening paragraph.

"Desire in men, when left unguided, resembles an unweeded garden—prone to unruly growth, disordered impulses, and shameful inclinations. It is the duty of all respectable women to gently prune such impulses before they blossom into impropriety."

There are even small, ridiculous charts claiming that a man's nervous system is too delicate to withstand prolonged excitement, that desire strains the spirit and weakens his reliability. Any stray imagining is

framed as a slippery slope toward impropriety.

“Better to keep one’s head bowed and one’s eyes modest than risk being ruled by an undisciplined heart.”

Another subheading catches his eye.

A Man’s Gaze: An Early Warning Sign
“If a man appears overly attentive to a woman not yet ruling his household, swift corrective measures are advised.”

And below that:

The Moral Danger of Men Becoming… Attached.

Jonas’s stomach knots. His thumb traces the page’s edge, and for a heartbeat the warmth he’s been floating in all morning flickers. He stares at the page now, the little inked lines lecturing him as though they know exactly what he’s been thinking about all morning.

Yes, the article is ridiculous. Yes, he knows better than to believe it. But the words still land, because he was raised on them, fed them spoonful by spoonful until they became instinct, reflex, and shame.

He imagined making Branwen tea earlier this morning. Imagined being hers.

And here, in black and white, the world hisses back.

Improper. Unguided. Attached. Dangerous.

He swallows, throat tight.

For the first time since dawn, his heart stutters with something other than joy. But then—

He touches the red twine around his wrist again. It becomes a steadying weight. The warmth returns like a tide, slow but certain. He reminds himself that Branwen tied that. Branwen had wanted him to keep it. It will protect him. He breathes slowly until his pulse settles again.

The booklet's pages tremble slightly between his fingertips.

Jonas had almost been convinced a kindly small fair folk had brushed by him this morning. Here, now, he has no doubt now that this magazine has been placed here *intentionally*. By something that had taken notice of his jubilance and wanted to be mischievous with him. It had surely placed the *Genteel Standard* here, half-hidden, just barely visible, just enough to be unsettling. An invitation to find it. A *lure…!*

Jonas presses his lips thin.

The timing… the location… the message…

He glances toward the shadows under the bed again.

Small ones, he thinks nervously.

One of the trickster sort, maybe. A little moss-foot or half-wisp that's learned to nest inside draughty servant halls, tugging nerves for fun. The kind that likes fear, or fretting, or the scent of worry like sugar on the air. Jonas looks at the booklet, its frilled cover shining faintly in the morning light.

Yes. *Yes,* this has that feeling, like an intentional nudge. A prodding. A test.

Which means he must pay respect.

Immediately.

He cannot— *will not*— risk offending anything clever enough to leave him reading material tailored precisely to ruin his mood. He needs an offering. Something small, something sweet or savoury, something meant to appease. A leftover crust or a sugared bit of fruit. A *"grace to the small ones,"* as the saying goes— payment for peace, for mercy, and for leaving him be.

He finishes tidying the guest room and clutches the Genteel Standard tighter as he heads toward the scullery at a brisk, almost guilty speed, heart hammering.

Just a small piece, he tells himself. *A crumb of respect. A whisper of goodwill. Nothing tempting enough to draw them closer, just enough to keep them calm and out of my way.*

After traversing through the servant's corridors, he rounds the corner

toward the scullery door and falters.

The scullery is its usual chaos. Heat and steam mixes with the sounds of footfalls and the slap of wet cloth against stone. Pots boil over. Knives clatter. Someone curses as a basin tips. Soap-slick water runs in rivulets across the flagstones. Fish scales cling to sleeves. Heat from the brick ovens fogs the air enough to make Jonas's curls damp at the temples.

He slips inside with the same instinct that drives birds to fold their wings in tight spaces, making himself small and unobtrusive. He only means to grab a crust of something for the small ones. One scrap. A bit of bread. Anything.

But he doesn't make it three steps.

Because Branwen is here.

She stands at the far counter beneath the hanging lines of dried meats, shoulders broad and rigid, cutting at a knotted strip of sinew with a short blade. Her brows are drawn into a dark, brooding line; her jaw works with each muttered curse.

"—bloody—virtue—nonsense—"

"—as though *we're* the problem—"

"—not a child to be scolded—"

“—mirewolves can eat the whole Council for all I care—”

Her voice is pitched low, just loud enough for the nearest scullions to hear fragments they’ll repeat later. Jonas presses his back against the wall, *Genteel Standard* clutched to his chest, overwhelmed not by the noise or bodies or chaos—

—but by her.

Branwen, looking like the wind before a storm breaks. Branwen, fierce and frustrated and somehow even more beautiful like this. Branwen, whose shoulders rise and fall with each sharp breath. He is grinning—actually *grinning*— like a lovesick fool with a cursed magazine under his arm while she mutters about something clearly Very Serious and Very Noblewoman-Related that he knows absolutely nothing about.

He then forgets the *Genteel Standard* entirely. He forgets why he even came here. A ridiculous, helpless warmth pours through him. There is only her. The small ones wouldn’t dare trouble him now. Not with her so nearby.

Branwen!

His heart thumps painfully high in his neck, pulse fluttering like a trapped sparrow. His second thought pauses that brief spurt of jubilance.

She’s upset. I should— I should go to her. I should help. I should—

Before he loses his nerve entirely, he raises a trembling hand.

"…M–miss… B–Bran…wen…?"

She whips around as if expecting an attack. And when she sees him, her whole expression fractures. Not softens, exactly. Not melts. But falters. As though she had braced for a blow and instead found him.

Her shoulders lower half an inch.

Her jaw loosens.

Her eyes dart away as if embarrassed by how exposed she suddenly feels.

It hits him all at once: She's *flustered.* Jonas beams so hard his face aches. He can't help it. She's here. She's looking at him. And he's still floating from last night, from her mouth against his, from the way she whispered his name. He feels like a boy offered the sun. He takes one small, eager step toward her, determined to help with what ails her.

"Jonas," Her voice is rough. Almost as though it's stretched thin.

"D–d–do you n-need tea?" He offers quickly, taking another step forward, "Or— or I c–could bring yo–you something? A bu–bu–bun? F–fruit? I can g–get you—"

She straightens too quickly, posture correcting itself like armour snapping into place. Branwen's eyes dart around the scullery around them, as though looking for someone. Around them, scullery staff

move about, scraping pans, whispering.

“Jonas. Not here,” She says sharply.

Her voice has an edge to it. Not anger— no, he knows her anger. This is something else. Something tight. Something hunted. Jonas’s stomach swoops. Jonas ducks his head instantly, shrinking without thought and his smile falters.

“O–oh. I— I’m s-sorry,” He whispers, because apologizing only feels natural.

Her reaction is instant, like a snapped tether.

“No,” Her voice lowers to an urgent whisper, “No, Jonas, not like that. Don’t apologize.”

Confusion flickers through him.

She glances over her shoulder at the scullery workers, at least eight of them in various states of bustling chaos. Her jaw clenches, her throat bobbing in a tense swallow.

He’s never seen her look… hunted.

“Come here,” She mutters, nudging her chin toward the alcove beside the laundry passage, “Just for a moment.”

Jonas’s pulse jumps. He nods quickly and follows her.

They slip into the narrow bend of the corridor between the scullery and the laundry, Jonas dropping the *Genteel Standard* somewhere in between steps. The alcove itself is barely private, but the angles of the stonework hide them from casual view. Voices from the scullery muffle into an indistinguishable buzz.

Branwen puts one hand on the wall, as if steadying herself.

She murmurs, “I need to speak with you later. At the stables. When you’re done with your chores. I—” Her throat works, “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Jonas’s heart begins to hammer. She’s never spoken like this, voice raw and careful all at once. He searches her face, confusion and worry replacing whatever joy he had previously felt moments ago. He fears he won’t be able to help her with whatever is weighing on her mind, and that causes a deep sinking feeling to form in his gut.

“D–did I… d–do something—?”

“No,” Her voice snaps like a whip, “Jonas, no. Never.”

And when she looks at him again, her face is tight with something so raw it nearly frightens him.

“Jonas,” She says, cracking around the edges, “You didn’t do anything.”

Her hand lifts, hesitant and trembling, and settles against his cheek.

Jonas goes very still.

Her palm is warm from the kitchens. Her thumb rests at the hinge of his jaw, rough and calloused and impossibly gentle. He leans into it, helpless.

Branwen sees it. She no doubt *feels* it. Something in her posture loosens, just barely, but enough that Jonas notices.

“I reacted badly there,” She murmurs, “And you apologized. I shouldn’t have made you feel like you’d done something wrong.”

Jonas swallows hard. He still doesn’t fully understand, but her hand is on his face and she’s looking at him like he is something steady in a world where nothing is. His breath trembles; he doesn’t trust his voice.

A scullery maid pushes through the door with a bucket. Branwen drops her hand instantly. Jonas steps back on instinct.

But the moment the maid disappears down the corridor—

Branwen reaches for him again.

This time she cups his face in both hands. Her thumbs sweep up along his cheekbones, slow and grounding, drawing him close enough that he can smell the winter wind woven into her coat. Jonas's heart pounds so hard he feels it in his throat.

Branwen's gaze flickers down— to his mouth— then up again, softer than he's ever seen.

And her thumb, just barely shaking now, slides across his lower lip.

He inhales sharply, a caught sound too small to be a gasp and too raw to be anything else. A tiny, helpless squirm moves through him. His fingers twitch. His body leans closer without permission, shy but desperate to feel her, breathe her, be near her.

Branwen's breath stutters. Her eyes flicker in a way he's never seen before. They're wide, startled, almost luminous, as if something fierce inside her has been stripped down to something tender and trembling. There's a shine there, an intensity that pins him in place.

"Jonas," She whispers, sounding unguarded, exposed in a way she never lets herself be, *"I love you."*

He knows she means it. Knows she's saying it to soothe that panic she saw in him earlier. Knows she's trying to anchor him before the heavier conversation she promised for later. But all of that understanding blurs at the edges because her voice curls around those three words like they were meant for him alone. Jonas can't think past it, can't breathe past it. His mind empties in an instant.

Everything else in the world falls away.

Stone. Steam. Voices. Tasks. Worries. They dissolve like breath in the cold.

He is still. Entirely still. His knees feel weak; his fingers numb; his heart seems to skip and stutter all at once. Her palms cradle his face with a steadiness that contradicts the shake in her breath. Her thumbs trace slow, careful lines along his cheekbones, not once looking away from him, as if willing him to hear her, to believe her.

She says the words again, softer this time, like she's trying to place them directly into him, "I love you. I— I just— I want you to know that."

Jonas's lips part. A small, fragile sound escapes him. The room tilts. His chest tightens with something warm and overwhelming.

She loves him.

Branwen loves him.

Jonas tries to answer, but the words tangle instantly. His throat constricts. His stutter tightens around the confession like a knot. Panic sparks— what if it comes out wrong? What if the stumble ruins it? What if he disappoints her in the most fragile moment they've ever had?

His breath hitches, his mouth working uselessly for a second, but he forces himself forward, leaning into her hands as if borrowing strength from her touch.

“I… I l-l-love y-you, t-too.”

The words break out of him in pieces, delicate but honest. He feels them leave him like a held breath finally released.

A soft, trembling exhale slips from her. Her eyes fall closed for a beat, as if steadying herself against what she just heard, gathering the impact of it. Then she leans in, bringing their foreheads nearly together, just brushing. That small point of warmth feels like a vow.

Her breath mingles with his. Her hands hold his face as if she’s afraid he might disappear. His eyes flutter, overwhelmed by how close she is, by how gently she’s touching him, by how real she looks in this moment— Unarmoured, open, hers and his.

The world stays quiet around them. Only the heat between their foreheads, the faint tremble of her fingers, and the dizzying truth that they are both here.

“Come to the stables later,” She says softly, more certain than before. After the words leave her lips, she leans back. Looks at him like he’s sunlight breaking through a crack in the world.

Then, slowly, her thumb trails from his cheek down to his jaw… and then lightly across his lower lip again. The softest stroke. Not teasing. Not purposeful. Just familiarity. A want. A quiet *claim.*

Jonas’s knees nearly buckle.

She seems to realize what she's doing only when footsteps approach again. She pulls her hands back, jaw tightening as she slides into Marshal-formality. But she still steps close enough to press something into his hand. It's a small, paper-wrapped bundle.

"Shortbread," She whispers, "The good kind. Eat something before you float away."

Jonas's cheeks go scarlet, "Th–thank you…" She's his protector, but has given him something to appease the small ones nonetheless. *She's so perfect.*

Her eyes soften. Tender. Devoted in a way she probably doesn't know she's showing.

Then she turns and slips away, cloak brushing the stone, leaving Jonas standing there with shaking hands, a heart too full to hold, and the taste of her touch still warm on his lips. And utterly, completely confused because he has no earthly idea what just happened. He can't make sense of it, but maybe that doesn't matter.

Branwen said she loves him.

He thinks the fair folk themselves couldn't conjure anything sweeter.

While still perplexed with the past five minutes, he at least knows one thing with absolute, delirious clarity: Later cannot come soon enough.

The clouds settle low by mid-afternoon, heavy and thick enough that the fields look dim despite the hour. A flat grey drapes itself across the hills, and the air feels swollen with the kind of weather that promises a long, unpleasant night. Wind moves through the tall grasses in restless sweeps, bending them down in wide strokes as if smoothing a hide. It tugs at Branwen's braid and pulls at her cloak, and each gust carries the cold bite of rain waiting to fall.

Good hunting weather. Bad omen weather. Mirewolf weather.

She looks up at the grey sky, expecting raindrops that never quite fall, though the air feels heavy enough to burst. The clouds press low, swollen and bruised, the kind that promise a downpour she is not ready for. Her shoulders tense. The pressure in the wind feels too much like the hours before a flood. It prickles along her arms, crawls down her spine, dredges up memories she has spent years burying.

Branwen forces her jaw to relax, fails, and feels the muscle jump again.

Perfect. As if meeting with The Lady weren't enough. As if mirewolf sightings weren't enough. Now the sky is threatening to turn her into a shaking mess in front of her own hounds. She exhales sharply, irritation rising like heat beneath her skin. Today feels designed to pry her open in all the ways she most hates; to corner her between duty, fear, and memory.

Branwen stands ankle-deep in churned mud at the centre of the training run. The ground is soaked from previous nights' mist, soft and unstable beneath her boots. The hounds crowd in front of her, muscles taut, hackles lifted in half-anticipation. She can't blame anyone passing by for assuming the brewing storm is what has sharpened them into this restless formation. But Branwen knows better. Most of their attention is on the strips of meat in her fist, held just high

enough to command obedience.

Still… there is something electric in the air. She feels it threading between them like a taut wire. The dogs sense it too. Their breath rises in pale plumes that swirl and twist before being torn away by the wind. Their ears flick. Their noses test the air. They're waiting, not just for her command, but for something else moving unseen across the fields.

She snaps her fingers once. The crack cuts cleanly through the wind.

The pack surges forward in a coordinated burst, scattering mud. The older hounds take the lead, their voices dropping into deep, guttural snarls that she hasn't heard since before the Gala reduced them to performing party tricks. Branwen's chest tightens with grim satisfaction. *There* they are. Her real hounds. The ones trained for blood, for mire, for creatures that crawl up from the borders when the season turns wrong.

They swing toward the weighted pelt she rigged as today's target, teeth flashing in quick, brutal arcs. Their bodies move with purpose: low tails, powerful shoulders, claws digging for purchase. When they hit, they hit like a wave. Even the younger ones— gangly still, but eager— follow the pack's rhythm, snapping, pulling, shaking the pelt as it drags across the mud.

"Good," She murmurs, "Again."

Her whistle is a tight command that slices the air. The pack pivots, claws digging into the soft earth as they circle again. The sound of them, their breaths and growls mingling with the noise of claws tearing mud, fills the field more completely than the wind. A pair of brindled bitches peel off to circle wide, flanking just as they should. The largest female— scarred across the muzzle from last year's border

incident— keeps low, her growl a steady rumble. Two younger dogs dart forward to nip at openings, legs kicking up clumps of earth. The pack moves in a rough crescent, relentless and focused.

They look good. They look right.

They look like a hunting unit again.

Branwen's grip on the meat tightens. The storm threatens around her. The memories threaten beneath her ribs. But the hounds? They remind her who she is. What she does. What she will always do, no matter how the sky darkens or which noblewoman summons her at dawn.

Behind her, Esther hovers too close to the fence line with the training pole hugged to her chest. The girl has the posture of someone bracing for impact rather than holding steady.

"Move your feet," Branwen calls without looking, "Don't stand in their path."

Esther jolts backward at once, boots slipping slightly in the mud, "Yes, Marshal. Sorry!"

Branwen exhales a tight breath. She shouldn't snap at the girl, who means well and works hard. But the pressure building under her sternum has been there since morning, and Esther's nervous hovering is one spark away from lighting it. The Lady's words keep circling back through Branwen's mind, needling at every sore place inside her. Despite trying to push the conversation back so she can focus on the hounds, she comes back to a single comment The Lady had said seemingly as an after thought, when they were done discussing what to do with the mirewolves.

“Please refrain from your affections until the mirewolf issue is resolved.”

Affections. As if her heart could be wound up and put in a locked drawer when convenient. As if Jonas was something she had picked up in passing, not someone she has wanted for weeks with a seriousness she hardly knew how to acknowledge.

The hounds snap at each other as they reset their formation. Their snarls ride the wind, and Branwen turns her attention back to them, more grateful for their focus than usual, and rewards some of them with meat. Training them gives her something to hold on to.

A movement at the field’s edge catches her eye. Brenna stands near the fence, pale-faced and gripping the post behind her for balance. Branwen doesn’t need to be told the girl is still recovering. The cleansing draught needs time to leave the body. Brenna is here anyway, working because none of them get the luxury of staying abed when duties wait.

Branwen strides toward her until the distance between them is thin, “If you collapse in front of the dogs, I’ll have to drag you to the healer myself.”

Brenna musters a tired smile, “I won’t collapse. Just a bit light-headed.”

“You should be resting. You’ll be no help against mirewolves like this.”

“Work still needs doing,” Brenna lifts her chin, though her eyes waver, “I can still help. Let me haul feed or something.”

Branwen softens despite her irritation. Brenna has grit. Freeholder grit. It is the kind of survival instinct Branwen recognises intimately. But grit can become foolishness quickly. She nods toward the overturned feed bin nearby.

"Sit. Just for a moment. That's an order."

Reluctantly, Brenna obeys.

The wind sweeps across the field again, colder than before. Branwen turns back to the hounds, watching them regroup and ready themselves for her next signal.

They will need to be perfect if the rumours of mirewolves near the ridge are true.

And tomorrow, The Lady will insist on joining her for the survey.

The thought makes Branwen grind her teeth.

"I will accompany you during the perimeter survey tomorrow," The Lady had continued when the topic shifted to the mirewolves, *"I would not ask if the risk were not significant."*

Of all the things to announce without warning. Of all the choices a noblewoman could make. She imagines the scene already: The Lady riding behind her with a guard contingent, acting as if she is sharing the risk when everyone knows whose body will meet a charging beast first. Branwen is the shield. Branwen is the weapon. And if anything

goes wrong, Branwen will be the one pinned beneath teeth while The Lady is dragged back to safety.

Yet the same woman who needs Branwen this badly cannot be troubled to grant her a last name. No permanent anchor. No legal status beyond The Lady's good will.

Years of service. Years of hunts that should have killed her. Years of protecting the estate's borders and managing its animals. And still she signs her name with that humiliating blank where a family name should stand. Freeholders are meant to be grateful for scraps. That is the unspoken rule in every estate ledger. She has lived with that truth her entire life, had even been unbothered with the lack of last name for years, but now it gnaws at her in new and unbearable ways.

Because she's not the only one affected now.

What can she offer Jonas if she cannot even offer him a name?

The Lady's voice cuts across her thoughts again, unwanted but impossible to forget, *"Marriage is the logical, efficient solution."*

To whom? Branwen wonders. To whom is it logical?

She sees Jonas in her mind's eye. She sees the soft slope of his shoulders when he relaxes near her, the shy brightness that warms his whole face when she looks at him too directly, the nervous fidgeting with his sleeves that betrays every emotion he tries to hide. She hears again the way he whispered *"I love you"* earlier, trembling but steady, giving her a truth he had never given anyone else. He had looked at her with belief, *real belief,* as if she were something unshakable, someone who could hold him safely.

And he deserves better than what she can give him now.

He deserves a marriage born of warmth and certainty. He deserves to feel chosen, not cornered into respectability. He deserves a future he walks into willingly, not one arranged around him like a cage because someone in a high room decided propriety mattered more than autonomy.

Branwen's jaw tightens again.

Because by law, husbands belong to their wives. Not in metaphor. On paper. Jonas would be hers. Her— *property,* her responsibility, her legal shadow. A misstep from her could stain him. A lack in her could diminish him. If she marries without a last name, he becomes Jonas of Nowhere. If she falls out of favour, he falls with her. If she dies without title, everything tied to him evaporates.

And she has no home suitable for a husband. Just a narrow room between the kennels and stables, barely enough space for her bed, her gear, and the few belongings she keeps hidden from curious eyes. A room that smells of dog and straw. A room built for a solitary marshal, not a married household.

Would he be expected to live there? To cook at her cramped table? To fold himself into her strange, rough-edged life without question?

The thought claws at her chest.

She *wants* to marry him— gods, she does. One day. On *their* terms. After mornings spent tracing the curve of his smile, after seasons of shared work and shared quiet, after a life has slowly knitted itself

between them. She wants the low domestic hum of him humming while he cooks, the soft clatter of his tea kettle, the gentle way he says her name when he thinks she isn't listening.

She wants all of it.

But the vultures circle. Thought after thought, sharp and heavy. Jonas's future. Her own. The ways their paths weave together and the places they tear apart. She wants to give him certainty, sunlight, gentleness. Not borrowed rooms and legal vulnerability.

She wants to give him a home that feels safe and warm, something built of their choosing. Not some drafty stable loft that screams her limitations louder than any insult.

Not under threat of dismissal or reassignment or noble meddling.

The wind picks up again. It howls along the training run, rustling the grasses and pulling more impatient growls from the hounds. Branwen straightens and signals them with a sharp whistle. The pack charges the pelt again, jaws snapping shut as they hit the target.

Esther flinches and nearly drops the extra pole she is holding, "Marshal, should I reset the scent strips? The wind keeps blowing them off."

"Yes," Branwen says, "Do it quickly."

Esther hurries off, boots squelching in the mud.

The sky darkens another shade. Branwen looks toward the ridge. The line between the trees and the sky blurs into one heavy mass of grey. Something in the air has shifted. The pressure sits low and steady, as if the hills themselves are holding their breath.

Mirewolves might be out there. Perhaps watching. Perhaps waiting.

The hounds react before she can. Their heads snap toward the ridge in perfect unison, ears lifted, bodies alert. A low vibration spreads through them, a tension building beneath their skins.

Branwen's pulse steadies. Not fear. Something closer to readiness.

She steps into the wind.

"Good," She whispers, "Let something try us today."

The wind then shifts, colder than before, and a scent rolls down from the ridge that makes Branwen's shoulders stiffen. It is faint, but the hounds catch it immediately. Their hackles rise. A few of them issue low, throaty warnings, the kind that travel along the ground more than the air. It vibrates in Branwen's shins. She doesn't see movement in the treeline, but the sense of something there is unmistakable. The pressure sits on her chest in a way that feels familiar. Mirewolves have a particular weight to them, a presence like a held breath that never quite resolves. She scans the ridge, eyes narrowed against the wind, until she forces herself to blink and step back.

Nothing there. Not yet.

They come in storms, and the storm has not fully arrived.

She whistles the hounds to heel. Their reluctance is immediate. She feels the tension in their bodies as they pace near her boots, ears still angled toward the ridge. She rests a hand on the backs of one of the older ones. The dog presses into her thigh with a steadiness that grounds her for a moment. The field is louder now, wind threading itself through grass and fur and human nerves.

Branwen turns to check Brenna again. The girl has obeyed and sits on the overturned bin, posture tight and breath shallow. Her pallor stands out starkly in the dim light.

Branwen walks over, boots sinking into the cold mud with each step. “You need to go in,” She grunts out, her irritation from The Lady still in her voice. Branwen tries to soften her tone when she says next, “You’re grey in the face.”

Brenna shakes her head, “I can stay another few minutes. I’m helping.”

“You’re not. You’re barely upright,” Branwen replies. She rests one hand on the back of the bin and studies her, “And if a real wolf pack comes down from that ridge, I’ll need Esther, not you. She can run for help. You’d collapse halfway across the field.”

Brenna winces at the truth of it but doesn’t argue further, “…All right. I’ll go once Esther finishes resetting the strips.”

“You’ll go now,” Branwen says. Her voice leaves no room for debate.

Brenna nods, defeated but relieved, and stands carefully. Her balance wavers for a moment. Branwen steadies her by the elbow. The contact

is brief but enough to make the girl's eyes widen in thanks.

"Straight back to the scullery. Drink something warm. Tell the head cook and Maud I sent you. She won't argue with that."

Brenna manages a tired smile, "Yes, Marshal."

As she leaves, the wind drags the hem of her coat behind her like a flag. Branwen watches until the girl disappears down the path, then turns her attention back to Esther, who is struggling to knot a strip of scent-soaked cloth around a stake. The wind keeps snapping the loose end out of her hands.

"Esther," Branwen calls, "Tie it lower on the stake. The wind can't get under it as easily."

Esther adjusts, and the strip settles properly, "Got it, Marshal!"

"Good. Now stand clear."

The girl darts back behind the fence again, more mindful of the hounds' path this time. She shivers as she folds her arms, and Branwen notices the way her shoulders curl in against the cold. It is not particularly frigid, but the wind cuts sharply, and now that the clouds have thickened, the world seems drained of warmth. Branwen rolls her shoulders to ease some of the tightness creeping into them.

The Lady's words. The expected surveys. The pointed instructions about Branwen's affections. Jonas's face when she told him they'd speak later. The distant scent drifting from the ridge. The hounds. Brenna. The storm building overhead.

Everything in her life feels like it is sitting on the edge of a knife.

She whistles again, signalling the hounds to resume their rotation. They leap forward eagerly, tearing at the dummy pelt with renewed fervour. Mud kicks up beneath their paws. Their snarls ripple through the field in a steady rhythm.

“Good work,” She calls to the dogs as she signals them to slow their pace, rewarding them with more meat. They come trotting back in small excited bursts, tongues lolling, bodies quivering with leftover adrenaline. She scratches the ear of one of the younger ones, who leans into her with wholehearted affection.

“Marshal?” Esther says hesitantly. She stands with her hands clasped in front of her, eyes flicking nervously between the dogs and Branwen’s stiff posture, “Do you want me to fetch the guard? Just in case?”

“No. If they were close, the hounds would be baying instead of grumbling. We’re safe enough for now.”

Esther nods, “Yes, Marshal.”

Branwen studies the horizon again. The pressure in the air feels heavier than before. Rain is coming. Maybe not quite a storm yet. But it’s on its way.

Her resolve sits firm beneath all of it.

She will keep Jonas safe. She will keep her position. She will fight what she must. And if The Lady intends to join her on tomorrow's survey, then Branwen will make damned sure she understands what that choice entails.

A gust slams across the field, loud enough that Esther ducks her head against it. Branwen's cloak snaps backward, and the hounds brace their legs against the force. The ridge looms darker than before, the trees silhouette against a sky that no longer looks merely heavy but threatening.

Branwen lifts her chin into the wind.

"Ready," She commands.

The hounds respond instantly, every muscle going taut.

Whatever comes next— storm, wolf, or noble expectation— she will meet it head-on.

And she will not face The Lady tomorrow with fear. Only determination.

Because everything she loves, everything she wants, is finally within reach.

And nothing, not the storm, not the mirewolves, not The Lady's rules, will take that from her.

Jonas approaches the stables with the same nervous, floating step he uses when walking around stones he believes the fair folk may be hiding in— slow and careful like the ground might shift if he presses too hard. A little kettle hangs from his fingers, warm through the cloth, steam still curling faintly from the spout. He brewed the tea himself, watching it steep like it was some delicate ritual he had to get right, checking it twice to make sure it hadn't gone bitter or weak. Branroot and mint. He thought it would be perfect after a long, cold afternoon with the hounds.

He hopes it tastes right. A comforting warmth from the chill. If only Jonas could set up something more permanent in the stables so he can brew her teas more conveniently.

He also hopes she wants it. Something to soothe her once it starts raining harder. He can feel a light drizzle pattering on his cheeks. He wants to ensure she will be alright, regardless if there is a storm or not.

The stable yard is quiet except for the distant barking of the evening drill and the low rumble of horses shifting in their stalls. Wind slides over the eaves in long sighs, carrying the smell of rain and mud and damp leather. The whole place looks different from earlier— muted, shadowed, the sky smeared with heavy clouds that threaten a storm.

The servants have been whispering about mirewolves for hours now, and though Jonas pretends not to pay attention, the tension has been building like a string pulled tight.

He rounds the corner.

Branwen stands beside an outer stall, checking the latch with a

practised shove. Her shoulders are rigid, her posture sharp in a way that means she's been carrying something heavy for hours. The wind tugs at her braid, pulls at her cloak, sets stray strands of hair across her cheek. She wipes them away impatiently.

Then she sees him.

Something in her expression loosens, just a little, barely enough for anyone else to notice. But Jonas sees it instantly. He feels it like warmth moving toward him. It's nothing like the scullery, looking as though she was about to be struck. She is at ease here… Mostly. Much more comfortable.

"Jonas," She says, and his name in her voice makes his breath trip over itself.

He bows his head too fast and ends up fumbling the kettle, "G–g–good evening, M–miss Branwen. I— I b-brought…" He holds the kettle up with both hands, embarrassed, "T–tea. F–for you."

Her brows draw together— Not in disapproval, he realizes a moment later, but in something softer, something surprised. She takes the kettle from him, her fingers brushing his. Her hand is warm from the work and the wind. Her thumb pauses very slightly on his knuckle before she pulls back.

"Thank you," She murmurs.

Jonas's face burns. He wants to duck behind the nearest stall door and evaporate.

He follows her deeper into the stables when she gestures for him to step inside. The late light slants through the slats in pale, dusty lines. Horses flick their ears toward them, snorting softly. A single lantern hangs near the tackroom, casting a low amber glow along the walls.

His face feels a more intense heat when he glances at the tackroom door.

When they're further inside, Branwen closes the distance between them with a kind of deliberate calm that makes Jonas's heartbeat scatter. She rests her hand lightly on his forearm and guides him toward the shadowed space between two empty stalls. She gets two cups from a nook somewhere and wordlessly pours them both tea, before placing the kettle down gently.

His voice comes out thin, the cup warm in his hands, "Y–you s–said you… n–needed to t–talk?"

Branwen's eyes flick past him toward the open doorway. No one is there, the yard silent except for the distant shuffle of a horse, but she checks twice anyway. There's a tension in her stance she hasn't fully managed to bury, something braced and held tight beneath her ribs. It makes Jonas want to smooth the knots from her shoulders with both hands.

He swallows, "Are… are y–you alright?"

Her jaw shifts once, then again, like she's rearranging her thoughts. Instead of answering, she steps closer and curls her free hand around his.

The strength and warmth of her grip send a tremor straight through him.

He tries for a small smile, “I–I… um… w–would’ve c–come sooner if you w–wanted,” It comes out soft, shy, almost teasing, “Y–you didn’t have to w–wait.”

Her mouth twitches. Not quite a smile, but something gentler, “If I told you to come sooner, you’d have stopped all your chores and run across the whole estate without looking where you were going.”

“I–I w–would n–not,” He tries, but is immediately flustered because she’s right of course.

“You would. You always do when it’s me.”

His ears go hot, “I–it’s n–not… I d–don’t… I j–just—”

Her thumb brushes his knuckles, slow and grounding, and she steps even closer. The movement fills his senses with her warmth, the faint scent of wind in her hair, the reassuring solidity of her presence. Her eyes fix on him with a softness that aches. There’s strain beneath it too. Something heavy she’s been carrying all day. Then her free hand leaves his and goes to cup his face, the gesture is so gentle it feels almost fragile, yet there’s a desperation beneath it, as though she needs the contact to anchor herself.

“I’m sorry,” She says.

Jonas’s stomach drops like a pebble into a well, “F–for w–what?”

“For snapping earlier. You apologized. And you shouldn’t have. I

didn't expect to see you in the scullery. I wasn't steady. I didn't know where to put… any of it."

He exhales in one large breath, relief sweeping through him so quickly it makes him sway forward, "I–it's alright… I… I j–just apologized b–because I–I w–was surprised. A–and I thought maybe—"

"You don't have to apologise for existing, you know," She says, firm but tender, her thumb sweeping along his cheek, "Not to me."

His throat tightens, "O–okay," He says quietly, though his instinct to apologize again rises so sharply he almost laughs at himself.

She sees it. Of course she sees it. "Don't," She warns softly.

"I w–wasn't g–going to," He lies.

"You were," She huffs, and for a moment the worry in her eyes shifts into something fond, "I've said this before, but you're terrible at lying."

His shoulders curl, but he's smiling now, "S–sorry."

Her brows lift in flat disbelief.

"S–sorry," He repeats, quieter and sheepish, eyes darting down.

Branwen huffs and without hesitation brings her cup to her lips and

takes a long drink of the steaming hot tea like it's water and she's dying of thirst.

Jonas jolts, "M-Miss B–Branwen! C–careful, it's h–hot!"

She swallows, a faint wince crossing her face, "Yes," She says, lowering it, "I noticed."

"You're g–going to b–burn your to–tongue," He fusses, stepping closer before he realizes, lifting a hand as though he might somehow cool her mouth with a wave of it.

"It's fine. I needed it. Call it liquid courage," Her voice comes out steady, but there's a slight catch in it— A tell he's learned to recognise. Liquid courage indeed. She rests her cup near them with a forced calmness, though her fingers flex once as if still feeling the heat, "You should drink your own tea."

He obeys, naturally. Taking small and nervous sips before warmth settles comfortably in his belly and he also sets his cup aside, bracing himself. Without realizing it, he begins to ramble to keep himself from fretting too much. One of his hands goes to nervously rub the red twine on his wrist.

"I–if you're c-cold enough to dr–dr–drink tea l–like that… You… y–you could ask me to b–bring you w–warmer clothes," He offers hesitantly, "Or… or m–more tea. Or… or j–just ask me to s–stay. I c–can do that."

Her breath catches. For a heartbeat, she looks as though she wants to pull him against her and never let go.

That warmth swells inside him again, soft and steady.

Then she says it.

“The Lady summoned me.”

Jonas’s heart skips so sharply it feels like a tug behind his ribs. The air in the small space seems to contract around him. His palms dampen instantly, and he fights the urge to shrink, to fold, to brace for impact. He knows enough of the house’s rules. He knows what he and Branwen shared last night wasn’t small. Wasn’t truly invisible. Wasn’t something The Lady would ignore once she saw the shape of it.

He hadn’t really thought of it. He was simply too happy. But now dread coils around him. Now he worries a small one might’ve whispered something into The Lady’s ear.

He forces his voice out, “A–ab–about… us?”

“Yes.”

The word is quiet. Heavy. Branwen looks like she hates saying it. She checks the doorway again even though they’re alone, her shoulders wound tight like pulled rope.

Jonas’s stomach tightens with nerves, “D–did she… s–say I’d—” He swallows. He knows, ultimately, the quiet ways servants talk when nobles aren’t in earshot, knows the weight of impropriety, knows exactly how fragile a man’s position in a household can be. He had never had reason to worry about it before, but now…

“A–am I b–being dis–dismissed?” The word tastes awful. Like dirt and fear.

Branwen shakes her head immediately, “No. Not that.”

He exhales, but the breath is thin, wobbly. His stomach doesn’t unclench. Dismissal is only one possibility. There are other punishments for men who step outside the lines drawn for them. Other consequences. Other humiliations nobles use to make sure servants remember their place. He has seen men sent to discipline halls, made to stand through public corrections, given extra duties meant to shame them back into obedience.

His thoughts spin. His hands shake.

Branwen sees it happen, sees the panic stuttering through him, and she steps closer. Close enough that her coat brushes his arm, close enough that her warmth breaks through the chill in his blood.

“Jonas,” She says softly, “breathe.”

He tries. He really tries. He draws in a breath but it catches halfway, snagged on the rising dread, “I–I d–don’t… w–want to be s–sent away.”

“You’re not,” She says again. This time her voice is firmer, leaving no space for doubt, “You’re not being punished.”

He stares up at her, eyes wide and uncertain, “Th–then… wh–

what…?”

Branwen hesitates. Her jaw shifts once, then again, the sign she’s choosing her words with care, “The Lady suggested…” She stops, grimaces, and tries again, “She proposed you be reassigned.”

“R–reassigned?”

“Yes.”

His brows draw together. The fear doesn’t vanish, but confusion pushes into the edges of it, “To… wh–where?”

“The stables and kennels.”

He blinks. Once. Twice. That makes no sense.

“But… I l–like the stables,” He murmurs, voice small, “A–and the kennels. I… I d–do half the w–work there an–a–anyway.”

“I know,” She huffs a quiet, frustrated breath, “That’s not the issue.”

He tilts his head, still lost and frightened, “Th–then… why…?”

Her expression tightens. Not angry with him— he can feel that— but with the world, the rules, the estate, the situation. With herself, even. “Jonas,” She says quietly, “Men don’t get reassigned for no reason. Especially not from domestic halls to posts attached to other staff.

People would assume you were being corrected. Or that you'd done something improper."

His shoulders tense, "But… I d–didn't."

"I know you didn't." She reaches out and brushes her fingers along his forearm, grounding him, "But people will talk anyway. They always do. And being placed as an attached domestic under me…" She trails off, looking pained. "It will look like favouritism again. Or impropriety. Unless..."

Branwen's mouth flattens. Her gaze shifts away, jaw clenching like she's wrestling the words into something gentler.

"The Lady brought up appearances. The risk to the estate if people start whispering."

Jonas winces. Of course they would whisper. They already had.

"She didn't insult you," Branwen says quickly, continuing to read his fear, "But she was…" Branwen grimaces, "Clear."

He braces again, heart kicking hard, "C–clear… how?"

Branwen hesitates. Her fingers flex once at her sides, and she looks like she wishes she could punch the wall, "She suggested a sanctioned courtship."

Jonas's breath stutters.

Branwen continues, voice low, “Which leads to a marriage contract.”

His ears ring. The world tilts. The floor seems to shift under him. Marriage. Marriage. His heart leaps into his throat, a wild, shocked flutter.

“M–m… Ma… M–marriage,” He breathes, almost inaudibly.

Branwen flinches at the way he says it, like a threat is hiding inside the word. “Jonas… listen. Please. I need you to understand this.” She steps closer, hands half-raised as though she wants to hold him but doesn’t want to overwhelm him. She furrows her brows in consternation, “I would never force you. Not into reassignment. Not into courting. Not into— anything you don’t want.”

Her voice cracks a little.

Jonas stares at her.

At her clenched jaw. At the tightness in her eyes. At the way her hands hover, wanting to touch him but holding back.

He realizes, all at once, that the dread in her body isn’t fear of The Lady.

It’s fear of hurting him.

It's fear of him leaving.

It hits him with such force that he almost laughs— Half a breathless, incredulous sound of disbelief. All this trembling tension, all this bracing, all this carefulness from the whole day and she thinks he wouldn't want her. She has been winding herself into knots because she thinks he might… recoil?

He doesn't think.

Jons bolts forward, catching her hands in both of his. He's too fast and *very* eager, nearly knocking into her chest. His fingers wrap around hers with a wild, breathless certainty.

"I'll b–be your h–husband—!!"

The words burst out of him with so much earnest joy he feels them echo in his ribs.

Branwen makes a choking sound and goes absolutely still.

He can see the shock ripple up from her shoulders, can see her breath stop mid-inhale, can see her pupils widen as if she's staring at a lightning strike landing at her feet.

Her mouth parts slightly.

"…Jonas?" She manages.

Her voice is nothing like her usual tone. It's thin. Unmoored. Completely and utterly baffled.

Despite it, he beams up at her, red-faced and glowing, hands clutching hers like he might float away if he lets go.

Branwen doesn't move. She just blinks owlishly.

Jonas stands there glowing like a lantern, her hands caught in his, his whole body trembling with the force of what he's just declared. He has never felt so certain of anything in his life. It pours through him in a warm rush, sweet and dizzying. It's impossible to contain. All those half-formed fantasies he imagined earlier come roaring back with blinding clarity.

Her husband.

He can see it again. For real this time. Not in some grand hall or noble registry, but in the quiet ways that matter. Thoughts he has had before come back, making him giddy. Sweeping her little stable room so she doesn't trip over her boots, leaving her stew on the table after long hunts, mending her shirts, keeping her tea hot, being someone she returns to when the world has taken every piece of her strength.

He sees himself beside her in a cottage that doesn't exist, sleeves rolled, apron tied, hair all flopped to one side from steam. He sees her walking in tired and cold and dropping straight into his arms. He sees mornings— soft, slow, and safe— with her fingers brushing sleep from his eyes.

He feels so warm he might burst.

The look on her face is nothing like warmth.

It's stunned. Stricken. Even a little horrified at the force of his certainty. Her eyes are wide, dark in the low lantern light, and she looks as if someone has yanked the ground out from under her.

But he continues beaming up at her, earnest and hopelessly besotted, "R–r–really! I— I m–mean it! I'll wr–write Eliam! I'd— I'd b–be your —"

"Jonas."

This time her voice is firmer this time, the kind of tone she uses to stop a young hound from launching itself off a fence.

"Slow down."

He blinks, "S–slow…?"

She frees one hand from his grip gently, not pulling away so much as placing a steadying palm against his chest. He feels the warmth of it through his shirt, a full, grounding weight that almost melts his knees.

"You're nineteen."

He blushes to the roots of his hair, "…I—I kn–know how o–old I am."

Her mouth twitches, pained and almost fond, “The point is that you’re *not* old. And this is your first—” She stops herself, jaw tightening, eyes briefly closing as she rephrases, “Your first real attachment.”

Jonas tries to laugh it off, but it comes out soft and breathless, “Y–you’re my o–only at–attachment.”

“Exactly.”

His smile falters, “Th–that isn’t a bad t–thing.”

“It could be.”

He stares at her, confusion creasing his brow, the warmth in his chest flickering. He loosens his grip on her fingers but doesn’t let go. He would never let go unless she asked.

“Miss B–Branwen…?”

She lifts her other hand and cups his jaw again, her thumb brushing the soft line of his cheekbone. The touch is so gentle he sways toward it, instinctive, like a plant leaning into the sun.

“Jonas,” She says, barely above a whisper, “I want you.”

His breath catches.

“I want you more than I have wanted anything in years.”

Her voice shakes on the last word.

He brightens, radiantly and foolishly.

“But,” She continues, and his heart stumbles at the sound of it, “I wanted time.”

Her thumb strokes his cheek, slow and aching.

“I wanted us to find our own way. To fall into this gently. For you to settle into it without pressure. Without fear. Without every noblewoman’s expectation looming over you,” She draws a shaky breath, “Not like this. I want you to have the time to truly decide that I’m— I’m your person. I don’t want you to grow to regret being with me.”

He shakes his head quickly, desperate and heart pounding, “I’m— I’m n–not sc–scared.”

“You’re nineteen,” She says again, softer this time, “Men here rarely get choices. The world is built to funnel you straight into someone else’s household. I want you to actually have a choice. To choose freely with no one watching. No one pressuring. No summons. No threats. Not even my wants weighing you down.”

“I’m ch–choosing y–you,” He whispers, and it’s so immediate, so certain, his voice nearly cracks with the force of it, fragile and defiant. He insists when he sees the look on her face, “I— I *am.* “Y–you’re not… w–weighing me do–down.”

She lowers her forehead to his, closing her eyes as though the closeness steadies her. Her breath fans across his lips, warm and uneven.

"You don't see it yet. But I do."

She pulls back just enough and looks at him for a long time. Jonas knows what he must appear as… hopeless and lovestruck. His bright eyes. His flushed cheeks. His trembling hands. His whole soul reaching toward her like it can't help it.

And Branwen— fierce, steady, immovable Branwen— looks like her heart is splitting open at the sight.

"I want to marry you. One day. When it's ours. When it's right. When you're certain in a way that isn't born of panic or gratitude or young love that hasn't had time to settle."

He frowns, hurt prickling at the edges of his chest. "I *am* c–c–certain," He insists again, and he means it with every atom of him.

"Jonas. Listen to me."

He tries.

"You deserve a future built on choice and time and stability. And *I can't give you that yet.* Not without a name. Not without a household. Not without a place that isn't a borrowed room in the stables."

He shakes his head quickly, words stumbling out instinctively, “I— I d–don’t care—”

“You should.”

And the look in her eyes is so full of love and fear and longing that Jonas’s heartbeat goes thin in his chest.

He stares at her, stunned and aching, “Wh–why?”

Branwen slides her hands down to his wrists. Her thumbs brush slowly along the inside where the Covenant Day knot is still tied. Each pass of her thumb is steady and deliberate.

“Jonas… once you marry, your life is bound to hers. Your work, your station, your protection, your claim to a home. The law doesn’t pretend men stand on their own. Your wife becomes the one with the authority. She becomes the one responsible for you in the eyes of the court. If she has a strong name, you’re sheltered,” She swallows hard, jaw tightening, “If she doesn’t… you’re vulnerable.”

He feels that word like cold water down his spine.

“And I don’t have a name,” She says, the words scraped raw from something deep, “I don’t have protections to give. I don’t have a household fit for us. I don’t have the standing to shield you the way a wife is supposed to.”

He opens his mouth to desperately say he doesn’t care again. That he doesn’t need shielding. That he trusts her more than any name on a ledger.

But she stops him with a gentle shake of her head.

“You should care. Because once you belong to my household, everything I lack becomes something *you* lack too.”

He stares up at her, lips parted, breath unsteady. He tries to step closer, but she catches his waist lightly, steadying rather than inviting, her expression a careful line between tenderness and fear.

“You’ve been through enough. You’ve been afraid enough. Confused enough. Pushed around enough. You deserve a place where no one can use you as a flight risk or a rumour or a weakness. And I can’t give you that. Not yet.”

Something in Jonas trembles.

Not fear. Not hurt.

Love. Painful, bright love that nearly knocks him off his feet.

He reaches up with a shy, trembling determination and cups her cheek with both hands. He has never done anything like this before. He has never touched her so boldly, so openly. Branwen freezes, startled, her breath catching against his fingertips. Branwen looks as though she’s bracing for impact from every direction but Jonas moves her face with his hands, small but certain, and it forces her to look at him rather than the storm she’s imagining.

He swallows and tries to collect courage from the warmth of her

cheeks.

“You… y-you s–said I’m n-nineteen like i–it’s… like it’s a re–reason I sh-shouldn’t love y–you,” He looks up at her through his lashes, “But… you ki–k–kissed me first.”

That stops her in a way nothing else has.

Her shoulders stiffen at first— Reflex, instinct, the old habit of guarding her emotions as if they’re a perimeter she must defend. But then her expression shifts. Softens. She blinks at him, once, slowly, as though he has spoken a truth she hadn’t allowed herself to fully look at.

Jonas presses on, gently but firmly, voice wavering yet determined, “You… y–you k–kissed me. L–last night. A–and… and you’ve t–touched me… s–softly, like I’m s–something you w–want,” His cheeks turn warm pink, but he doesn’t look away, “Wh–why would you d–do that… if you d–didn’t w–want the s–same?”

Her eyes close for a moment, agony and tenderness mixing across her face in a way that makes Jonas’s chest ache. When she opens them again, the conflict is still there, but clearer now and less hidden.

“Jonas, I want you so much I can hardly breathe around you sometimes,” Her voice wavers, as though pulled between relief and fear, “I’ve wanted you longer than I should admit.”

His breath catches, eyes going wide.

She lifts her hands to gently pry his palms off her cheeks, thumb

sweeping a line of warmth along his skin, “I kissed you because I lost my head. Because you looked at me like I was someone worth choosing. Because you make me feel…” She trails off, searching for the right word and failing, shaking her head faintly, “Because I couldn’t stop myself.”

He leans into her touch instantly, eyes soft and trusting, “Th–then… we’re on the s-same p–page.”

“We are,” She says, and it sounds like a confession.

He pauses, registering her tone, the thickness in her voice, “B–but… you’re still sc–scared.”

“I’m scared because wanting you is the easy part,” Her thumb moves again, tracing the skin of his hand, “But keeping you safe— giving you a life that’s yours, not something decided for you… That’s harder. And if we marry too fast, if I claim you before I can protect you properly, I could ruin things for you.”

He shakes his head, “You w-won’t.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I— I kn–know *you.”*

The words land heavy between them, soft but immovable. Her eyes flick from his to his lips, then back again, as if the sincerity is too much for her to look at all at once.

“And I’m n–not a ch–child. I kn–know what m–marriage is,” His voice grows quieter, but steadier, “A–and I kn–know what I f–feel.”

A muscle in her jaw tightens, then releases. Slowly, tentatively, her hands slide up his arms until they rest at the back of his neck. Her fingers thread into his hair, just lightly enough to give him the choice to lean in or away.

He leans in. He will always lean in.

“Jonas,” She murmurs, breath warm on his cheek, “I want you.” The words come out almost like a plea, “But I don’t want you to look back one day and wonder if you chose too early. If you chose wrongly. If you chose because I was the first woman who ever—”

He interrupts her softly, “I… I d–didn’t ch–choose you b–because you were th–the f–first. I ch–chose you b–because you’re… y–you. You’re th–the one who s–sees me,” He whispers, “You’re th–the one who’s… k–kind to me. You’re th–the one I f–feel s–safe with. Th–the one I w–want to… t–to cook f–for. And t–take c–care of. And w–wake up b–beside. Th–that didn’t c–come from n–nowhere.”

Her grip at his neck tightens gently, protective and almost fierce.

“A–and y–you k–kissing me,” He adds shyly, “W–was… one of th–the h–happiest m–moments of my l–life. I’ve th–thought ab–about it ev–every h–hour s–since.”

A soft sound leaves her, something almost wounded, and then she pulls him toward her, slow and then inevitable. His breath hitches as she brings him into her arms, her hold strong enough that his feet leave the ground for a heartbeat before she settles him against her.

Jonas buries his face in her collarbone with a small, helpless noise. Branwen's arms wrap fully around him, one hand at his back, the other at the back of his head, holding him with a quiet desperation that makes his eyes sting.

She breathes into his hair, steadying herself against him. "Dammit," She whispers, "You undo me."

He only clings tighter.

Her heartbeat is quick against his cheek. Her breath is uneven. But her hold is sure, unwavering.

"Miss Br–branwen?" He murmurs against her shoulder.

"Yes?"

"I… I'm n–not g–going anywh–where."

She closes her eyes, pressing her cheek to the top of his head.

"I know. And that's what scares me. But it's also what makes me… happy. More than I can say."

"I'm ha–happy t–too."

For a long, quiet moment, they simply stand there in the dim lantern glow of the stables, wrapped around each other, breathing in sync—

—And for the first time since The Lady's summons, Branwen lets herself believe, just for this one stolen moment, that maybe they can build something real.

Something safe.

Something theirs.

Chapter End Notes

Branwen: (spends all day worrying about Jonas and his future with her)
Jonas: I'M ALREADY AT THE ALTAR LET'S GO

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The darkness before dawn has its own temperature. A thin sting in the lungs that makes every breath feel like an intrusion. Jonas steps through it carefully, cradling his bundle of belongings tight against his chest as he crosses the yard toward the stables and kennels. The lanterns along the path flicker in the wind, casting brief swaying patches of gold that vanish as quickly as they appear. His boots sink slightly in last night's dampness. The sky is the colour of slate.

There are more guards patrolling lately. He sees their lanterns bounce, hears their feet marching.

Jonas unconsciously walks as quietly as he can. It's Quiet March hours, even if he's not in the house. He tries not to think about the fact that he has never walked this path with the intention of *staying*.

The stable doors are already open. Light spills out across the mud, warm and inviting in a way he can't quite trust yet. Inside, he hears the familiar scrape of metal, the shift of boots, and the low rumble of Branwen's voice. He tightens his grip on his little bundle. It isn't much. A folded blanket, two shirts, a comb, his mother's red thread, and the letter. Eliam's letter always feels heavier than it should.

He steps inside.

Branwen stands near the tack wall. Her hair is loose, untied but brushed, hanging heavy down her back in a thick, untamed line. Too early for her usual tight field braid. Too early for anyone to be awake

unless they have a reason to be.

But Branwen always has a reason.

Two stablehands stand near the hound pens— Brenna and Esther, he thinks— each with their own set of dogs already leashed and restless, tails flicking in anticipation. They are here to relieve the nightwatch, to take over perimeter rounds at first light. Branwen had already been awake before them.

“Take your firearms,” Branwen says, nodding to the wall rack. Her tone is level but clipped, voice low in the early hour, “And at least one guard. Wolves near the river aren’t shy this time of year.”

The one he thinks is Brenna makes a face, “Can’t believe people are seeing mirewolves. Thought they barely existed anymore.”

“Nearly hunted out,” Branwen replies, “Not gone.”

Jonas stops just inside the doorway, unsure if he should approach or wait to be acknowledged. But Brenna notices him first, tipping her chin with a small grin.

“Oh, already working? They put you here really early.”

Branwen turns, and the moment her gaze lands on him, something softens at the edge of her expression. She steps forward, taking him in with one quick glance. His bundle. His posture. His nerves.

“He’s not on rounds,” Branwen announces, “Jonas is being reassigned.”

Both stablehands straighten. Brenna almost looks delighted. Esther looks startled. One of the hounds snorts as if sensing the shift in attention.

Branwen crosses her arms, “He’ll be attached to my post as domestic.”

Jonas swallows hard. He wasn’t prepared to hear it said aloud in front of others.

“He’ll handle cooking for us now— not that we have a proper kitchen,” She mutters under her breath before continuing louder, “— mending, cleaning, tracking inventory, tidying up the carriage sheds, keeping the front stalls in order. Whatever odds and ends the post requires.”

Esther blinks, “Attached domestic? For here? That’s—”

“Uncommon,” Brenna finishes. Her tone almost has an amused lilt to it as her eyebrows arch, “Very uncommon.”

Branwen levels them both with a flat look that says *not one more word.*

“It’s sanctioned by The Lady. Consider it a courtship arrangement.”

That gets them.

Brenna's eyes widen. Esther inhales sharply, glancing between Jonas and Branwen in a sudden flurry of interest.

Jonas's face ignites with heat. Courtship. Out loud. In front of people.

He knows courtship is always a quiet thing among the servants and lower staff. Something supervised, something bound by rules and witness calendars and recorded schedules. Married couples on the estate exist, but not many. A footwoman and a scullion in the laundry. A gardener and her broom-maker husband. A scribe and her house server. They all have a different look about them. Content, settled, a little proud. Jonas never imagined being counted among them.

Brenna whistles low, "Well then. Congratulations."

"Don't," Branwen mutters with a half-hearted scowl, but there's colour in her ears.

Jonas fights the urge to curl in on himself. He gives the shallowest nod he can manage, his heart fluttering fast.

Branwen clears her throat, "He'll be sleeping in the loft. I've put a cot up there. Some space is already cleared."

Jonas grips his bundle tighter. He appreciates that she says it so matter-of-factly, as if this is normal, as if it doesn't make his whole chest light and painfully warm.

Branwen turns to the two women, "Keep to the usual rotation. Don't

linger near the west ridge."

"Understood," Esther says.

"And don't taunt the mirewolves."

"Was one time," Brenna mutters, "And it was just a skunk…"

Branwen does not dignify that with a response. Instead, she steps to Jonas. Her presence is steady and grounding. She doesn't reach for him, she rarely does unless she has a purpose, but she angles her body in a way that shields him slightly from the others.

"Stay here," She says quietly, smiling softly in a way that makes his heart skip a beat, "Look after the loft and the front stalls. Don't wander. Take it easy on your first day."

Jonas nods quickly, eyes wide, "Y–yes," And just because he's feeling a *little* bold, he adds, "M–Marshal."

There's a twitch at her expression when he uses her title. She lowers her voice further, so only he hears, "There are mirewolves skulking around. Wouldn't want you dragged off to the woods, otherwise I'll have to rescue you, and being a hero doesn't really suit me."

He startles. She smirks. Just slightly.

His heart flips.

Brenna coughs to hide a grin. Esther pretends to examine her hounds' harnesses but is very obviously trying to listen in.

Jonas bows his head, trying to hide the flush blooming across his face. He's still floating a little from yesterday— From the scullery, from the way she said *I love you,* from the way she nearly fell over backwards when he blurted out that he wanted to marry her. His heart hasn't steadied since. Every movement seems too light, too buoyant, as if the floorboards might lift under him.

Branwen gestures toward his meagre bundle, "Go settle your things."

He nods again, slipping past the stablehands as they move to begin harness checks. Their dogs bristle and sniff at him but allow him through, recognizing him from countless mornings of feeding and watering.

When he climbs the ladder to the loft, his hands shake so badly he almost drops his blanket. The loft feels larger than usual, not in physical size, but in meaning. The cot Branwen must've carried up the ladder last night sits in a small cleared corner, blanket folded, pillow placed with uncharacteristic care. The space beside it holds a little shelf where she must have pushed tack aside.

A space for *him.*

He kneels and sets down his belongings. They look impossibly small. A life condensed into a few scraps of cloth. He quietly arranges them in the shelf, smoothing each item twice before stepping back.

It looks… pitiful.

But also real.

Real in a way that catches him off guard.

He hears Branwen's voice rise slightly downstairs. She gives final instructions, checking inventories, reminding Brenna to take an extra ammunition pouch while the woman exasperatedly replies that she's *"fine now."* Jonas descends the ladder to return the empty bundle cloth to the laundry pile.

Branwen stands alone now. Her braid remains undone, rough from sleep and from rushing out before dawn.

Jonas stops just behind her, "C–can I…?"

She turns slightly, meets his hesitant gesture toward her hair, and stills.

A long beat passes.

Then she nods.

Jonas steps closer, breath caught. He gathers her hair carefully, it's warmer and heavier than he expected, and begins to braid from the crown of her head downward. He smooths the first handful with both palms, almost in apology, as though afraid he might tug or pull. His fingers sink gently into the thickness of it, finding the natural paths where the strands want to fall. He steadies his breath to keep his hands from shaking. Every time his fingertips brush her scalp, he feels

her lean, only barely, into the touch. He cradles the sections with his knuckles, mindful, almost protective, working as if he could ease her weariness just by being gentle enough.

Her breath deepens. Her shoulders ease.

A soft sound escapes her, almost a sigh.

Jonas's fingertips brush the back of her neck as he shapes the braid. Her hair smells faintly of smoke from the courtyard hearth and the herbal oil she uses to keep it sleek. He works slowly, reverently, pulling each strand smooth before weaving it in. He doesn't speak. Doesn't dare.

Branwen doesn't either.

The stable fills with the small sounds of morning— Hounds snorting in their sleep, leather creaking, the wind tapping loose boards in the rafters. He finishes her braid slowly, carefully, as though each twist of hair is something fragile he's been entrusted with. Branwen stands still for him, steady in a way that feels almost intimate. Her breath moves quietly in her chest, rising and falling in a rhythm he can feel through the air between them. When he ties off the end with the worn leather strip, her shoulders lower just a fraction, as if some small knot inside her has loosened.

"T–There…" He says quietly.

Branwen's fingers lift and ghost over the braid, testing its tightness. Then she gives a small grunt of approval.

“Good,” She murmurs as she turns to face him. Something tender flickers across her face, “Thank you.”

He nods, unable to speak for a moment. Jonas lets his hands fall as he steps back, unsure what to do with them now that they’re empty.

Her words warms him more than it should.

Before the warmth can settle, she brushes past him to reach for her coat where it hangs over a stall door. He watches her pull it on, the heavy oiled fabric shifting over her shoulders. That’s when he sees it—Flecks of straw clinging stubbornly to the shoulder, and several fine strands of hound fur near the collar.

He steps forward before thinking, hand lifting and brushing it off, “Y–you have… some.”

Branwen’s eyes track him with a softness that makes him squirm. Her expression gentles in a way that always unravels him. Something unguarded and fond, like she’s looking at a small kindness she still never expected to receive. There’s a tenderness in her gaze that turns his stomach light, as if she’s giving him a warmth he hasn’t earned but desperately wants to keep.

“So this is the first-rate attention I’m to expect from you now that you’re attached to me,” She says quietly, lips tugging into a lopsided smirk, “You set a very high standard.”

Heat blooms up Jonas’s throat. He shakes his head, “I j–just… wanted you to… lo–look proper.”

“Mm,” Her voice is a hum, warm and amused, “Dangerous thing, letting you fuss over me. I might start relying on it.”

Jonas goes very still. The idea settles in his chest like sunlight.

She catches the change in him, the way his breath pauses, the way his shoulders draw in, shy and pleased all at once. Something soft pulls through her too. A quiet beat hangs between them, as though both are acutely aware this morning has shifted them a shade closer, a half-step deeper. The air between them feels newly fragile and bright.

Branwen turns toward the stable doors, testing the wind that sneaks through the cracks. Dawn hasn’t truly arrived yet, only a thin suggestion of it, a diluted grey bleeding into the sky behind low storm clouds. The air smells like wet soil, riverwater, and waiting.

Jonas can tell it unsettles her.

She hides it well. Her stance is firm, weight balanced while her jaw is set, but he’s close enough to see the little things. The quick flick of her gaze toward the end of the kennels. The way her fingers twitch once at her thigh, then clamp still. She’s bracing against something she doesn’t want to name. He steps beside her almost without awareness, drawn in by the quiet tension. When she reaches for the door latch that leads to the yard, he beats her to it. His palm is braced against the wood as he pushes it open for her.

Other stablehands are already standing outside with the horses.

Branwen pauses when he reaches the door first, her brow lifting in slow, bemused disbelief. She studies him like he’s a puzzle she wasn’t expecting to solve just before dawn, this man who braids her hair with trembling hands, smooths her collar like it’s a privilege, and now

braces the door for her as though *he* were the hunt marshal and *she* the sheltered domestic.

Jonas lowers his gaze, cheeks colouring, “I… I j–just w–wanted to... O–open the door f–for you...”

The words come out quiet, earnest, feeling almost painfully sincere.

Her mouth twitches. It’s not quite a smile, but something warm tugged upward by affection she doesn’t bother to hide anymore.

“You know, That’s *my* job,” She nods toward the doorframe, voice dipping into a teasing drawl, “Proper chivalry and all that. Women open doors. Men walk through them looking very delicate and impressed. I can’t let you spoil me *that* much.”

Jonas’s breath hitches. Colour crawls up his throat in a slow, helpless wave, heat blooming just beneath his skin until even the tips of his ears feel warm.

Branwen’s shoulder brush his as she steps past. She keeps her voice soft and teasing when she adds, “But… I don’t mind when it’s you.”

And there— quiet and quick as a fingertip against his pulse— she gives him a look that makes the whole moment feel less like a break in custom and more like a secret they’re sharing. Cold air spills into the stables, brushing over their cheeks. Jonas shivers despite himself as he steps further inside the stables. Branwen’s coat catches the wind, snapping lightly at the hem.

She steps out, then immediately back in, scanning the rafters.

“Hounds,” She calls under her breath. She then lifts two fingers to her mouth and whistles— A sharp, slicing sound that seems to cut straight through the dim light.

The kennels answer. Not with a bark, not with anything so familiar. A low, shuddering chorus ripples through the shadows behind the stable. A heartbeat later, they emerge.

The hounds move like poured shadow. Sleek, pale-eyed shapes gliding over the packed dirt with uncanny silence. Their coats catch the thin grey light in mottled strips, their limbs long and blade-like. Not pets. Not even proper dogs. Something older. Something made for pursuit. For killing.

They cluster around Branwen with eerie obedience, forming a loose half-circle in front of her. Jonas watches, breath held, as the lead hound lifts its head and sniffs the air slowly. He’s reminded of the Black Maw again. Their teeth look like they can tear through dreams.

Branwen reaches out and rests her hand on the lead hound’s head. The dog leans into her touch with quiet devotion.

“Good,” Her voice alone calms them. Grounds them.

Jonas swallows. His palms dampen.

A moment later, more footsteps approach from the courtyard. The Lady arrives, riding gloves already on, her coat immaculate despite the hour. Some guards flank her, and behind them trots another smaller set of hounds. These ones are leaner, younger, restless in the presence of Branwen’s older, seasoned pack.

The Lady surveys the group with her usual cool precision, “Marshal.”

Branwen straightens, “My Lady.”

No hesitation. No tremor. Just steady professionalism, as though she isn’t standing beneath a sky that threatens to break open. Jonas watches the exchange from near Rilke’s stall, half-hidden by the wooden divider. He shouldn’t be close enough to overhear anything, but he can’t pull himself farther back.

He can’t look away from her.

Branwen tugs her gloves tighter, jaw flexing. The wind pushes another wave of cold through the yard. Jonas feels it as a shiver. Branwen feels it as something else— He can tell. Something remembered. Something old.

He wishes, fiercely and uselessly, that he could take even a shard of that weight from her.

Branwen turns toward Rilke, checking the mare’s girth strap and patting her flank. The mare shifts restlessly, picking up the storm before the sky fully declares it. Jonas moves automatically and quietly.

He steps to Branwen’s side and smooths her collar, fingers gentle. It’s reckless. The Lady stands only a few strides away, her guards a still, silent wall behind her. Stablehands glance over their shoulders. Touching Branwen like this, openly while unwed and without permission or station, is a small act of defiance. He knows it. She knows it. The risk hums in the air between them like the tension before lightning.

She stills. Her eyes meet his. A breath passes between them, warm and fragile.

“I’m going to look for wolves, not dinner. I don’t need to look so polished, you know,” She whispers, trying for lightness.

He flushes so hard he feels a pulse thrum behind his ears, heat climbing beneath his skin in a dizzy sweep, “Y–your c–collar was… cr–crooked,” He manages eventually, knowing full well how weak the excuse sounds. He just wanted an excuse to touch her, to take care of her— To offer any comfort he could, even if it meant braving The Lady’s line of sight.

Her expression shifts— Not soft, but *open.* A quiet, steadying warmth that feels almost like trust. Something she rarely shows where others might witness it.

“Thank you,” She says quietly.

Then— Hesitation. A small, flickering moment. She lifts her hand and rests her palm against his cheek, thumb grazing his cheekbone. Jonas nearly leans into it, swallowing a tremor. It’s bold, dangerously so. The kind of touch that could be interpreted as more than familiarity, more than gratitude. A silent declaration slipped into the morning air despite The Lady, the guards, the watching servants. Branwen does it anyway.

“I’ll be back before dusk. We’ll just be sweeping the ridge. So… Like I said, stay put and relax.”

“I’ll w–wait.”

“I know,” Her voice softens further, like she’s letting him hear something she rarely says aloud, “That’s why it feels easier to go.”

Stay put. As though the simple command can anchor him. Branwen turns to her mare as a stablehand hands her the reins. And Jonas watches her, watches all of them, preparing for whatever waits beyond the treeline.

Dawn bleeds faintly into the clouds.

The storm gathers its breath.

And Branwen swings into the saddle, her hounds fanning out like living shadows at her heels.

Branwen settles into Rilke’s saddle with fluid ease, as if the mare is simply another limb she commands. Her hounds tighten formation around her— Ten of them now, pale-eyed and sharp. The Lady’s younger hounds keep their distance, watching Branwen’s pack with uneasy reverence. Even the guards seem tense in their saddles, as though the weight of what they’re riding toward presses down on every breath.

Jonas moves back to stay half-hidden beside a stall door. The space between him and Branwen feels precarious, as if one step too far in either direction might break something he doesn’t know how to fix.

The Lady turns her horse toward the path leading down to the riverbank, “Marshal. With me.”

Branwen gives a single crisp nod. No hesitation. No sign of the tremor Jonas had glimpsed earlier in the quiet edges of her body. She nudges Rilke forward, the mare's hooves kicking up faint sprays of gravel as she moves.

Then, just as she aligns with The Lady, Branwen glances back.

A small turn of the head. A tiny sliver of a moment.

But Jonas feels it all the way through him.

Her gaze finds him easily. She looks at him as if anchoring something, like a final knot tied tight before stepping into a storm. He straightens instinctively.

Her eyes soften.

Then she gives the smallest nod.

A promise he feels rather than understands fully.

And then she turns away.

The Lady clucks softly to her horse. The guards fall into formation and Branwen's hounds surge ahead like breath made flesh, their silent paws barely disturbing the wet earth. The party begins its descent toward the river. Jonas watches until the mist swallows them, first the hounds, then the guards, then Rilke's silhouette, then finally the faint shape of Branwen's braid, a dark thread disappearing into the silver-

grey curtain of dawn.

Only when the last scrap of her vanishes does he realise he's been holding his breath. He exhales shakily. The courtyard feels colder in the absence of her.

He forces himself to step back further inside. Not because he wants to. Because she told him too.

Stay put. Look after the loft. Don't wander.

The stable doors thud softly shut behind him, muffling the rising wind. Jonas stands with his palm pressed flat against the wood, grounding himself in the last place she touched before riding out. He lingers there for a long moment, long enough for his breath to steady, not enough for his heart to.

Then he moves.

He climbs the ladder to the loft with slow, careful steps. The air up here feels heavier, the storm's presence stronger the closer he gets to the roof. The rafters creak faintly, old wood settling as the wind presses against the shingles. It makes him think of the way Branwen tenses at sudden downpours, the way her breath hitches for half a second before she forces it smooth.

Jonas reaches his cot and takes a lantern and lights it. The flame wavers but holds steady. It throws amber light across the loft, catching on the grain of the wood and the shape of the saddle rack. The warmth of it, small as it is, makes the space feel less hollow. He sits on the edge of the cot and looks at the blanket he folded earlier. Then smooths it again, even though it's already straight. He adjusts the placement of his satchel, then adjusts it again. He feels around

Branwen's twine on his wrist.

He's not sure what to do with himself.

His hands want to move, but moving makes the worry worse. Sitting makes it worse too. Breathing doesn't help. Thinking helps least of all. He glances toward the window slit overlooking the fields. Clouds churn low and heavy above the treeline. The light outside is turning the colour of old pewter. He can almost taste the rain coming.

Voices drift up from below.

A different pair of stablehands have returned briefly, gathering their harnesses and preparing the day's rotations. Their boots scrape against stone; metal buckles clink softly. He hears one of them mutter Branwen's name, followed by a hushed comment about the river shifting its banks overnight.

Then—

"…wolves get twitchy before storms…"

Jonas flinches.

He doesn't mean to listen further. He clamps his hands over his ears like a child, then drops them again because the gesture feels foolish, and besides, he's not sure what's worse: Overhearing or imagining.

The loft shudders as a gust of wind slams against the far wall. Dust

shakes loose from the rafters. Jonas's breath stutters.

Storm's building.

Storm's coming.

He grips the edge of the cot until his fingers ache.

"Sh–she'll come b–b–back," He whispers to himself.

The lantern flame flickers. Thunder murmurs distantly, low and threatening.

Jonas feels the old stories claw their way up from memory, the ones whispered by candlelight, where storms were alive and hungry, where the woods grew teeth, where mirewolves followed the scent of fear the way hounds followed blood.

And somewhere out there, in the thick of that rising wind and creeping fog, Branwen rides into the mouth of danger with nothing but her rifle, her hounds, and her fear she pretends she doesn't feel.

Jonas wishes, with all the quiet ache in him, that he could have done more before she left.

Held her longer.

Brushed the storm-shadow from her eyes.

Told her he loved her again.

But he didn’t.

So he waits.

And hopes the lantern burns bright enough for her to find her way home.

Two hours later, and the rain has not yet begun.

But the sky holds the heavy stillness of a storm preparing its first breath. Branwen rides at the front of the small party, the hounds trotting in a restless formation at her flanks, their ears pricked and bodies braced for whatever waits along the ridge. The Lady rides just behind her, posture impossibly straight despite the uneven forest path. Two guards follow, their horses snorting at the damp scent clinging to the air.

Branwen keeps her eyes on the treeline. The branches shift in the wind with slow, uneasy movements. Even after years of navigating these woods, she cannot shake the sense that the forest itself is listening.

The trees here grow close together, older than most of the estate’s marked lands. Their trunks twist upward like dark pillars, bark ridged and heavy with moss that glistens in the low, filtered light. Fallen needles soften the forest floor, muting the horses’ footfalls so the

entire party seems to move inside a cathedral made of green shadow and breath. Old river fog clings to the underbrush in pale threads, catching at the hounds' legs like ghostly fingers. Farther ahead, the path narrows under a canopy so dense it swallows colour. Only the thin gleam of the river appears now and then through the trees, a silver vein winding through the gloom.

"So this is the old South perimeter," The Lady remarks, her tone thoughtful rather than conversational. "It has been some time since I last inspected it."

Branwen nods, but her jaw tightens. She had argued, quietly but firmly, that The Lady should not be on this ride at all. A mirewolf sighting is not a minor disturbance, and the reports from two nights ago described a pack larger than anything the estate has seen in years. Yet The Lady insisted. Something about needing to understand the threat herself.

Now Branwen guides her horse down the narrow descent toward the riverbank, wishing she had pressed harder.

Mirewolves always move before bad weather. Every hunter, marshal, and farmer in the Dominion knows that. Stormfronts agitate them. Pressure drops drive them toward lower ground, and fast-rising rivers lure them even more. Old folktales claim the wolves hear something in the storm's belly that humans can't. Others say they simply know that prey gathers under cover before heavy rain. Whatever the reason, every attack recorded in the estate's ledgers over the last fifty years has happened within an hour of a storm breaking.

And mirewolves, unlike the gentler upland breeds, do not spook and scatter at the scent of humans.

They hunt in coordinated lines. They test boundaries. They *learn.*

Female-led packs, always. Old females leading on the flanks, young blood pushing the middle line. It's what made them so dangerous during the culling decades ago— Aggression paired with strategy. They were nearly hunted to extinction for it, but the ones that survived were the boldest, the cleverest. The ones who learned to read human weakness like scent on the wind.

Officially, they're here just to confirm sightings: Tracks reported near the west orchard, a carcass dragged too close to the fence-line, a couple of guards swearing they heard a low chorus howl at dawn. Branwen's instinct is to write up a witness report and leave it with the Outer Council to handle in the morning. Wolves don't usually approach the main house unless pushed by hunger or desperation.

But The Lady had saddled her own horse and her guards, armed with long rifles, joined her.

The hounds fan out near the water, tails stiff and noses low. The scent along the bank carries the sharp tang of wet leaves and old earth, but beneath it lingers something sour. Unsettling. Some of the hounds give low, uneasy whines. Branwen feels it too, a prickle up her spine as though the forest remembers the last time it watched her ride through. This stretch of land has seen storms and losses both. Its silence feels expectant.

Branwen stiffens in the saddle. The river runs high this time of year, swollen from meltwater, the surface shifting like muscle beneath taut skin. Her throat tightens. She forces herself to breathe through it. The sound of rushing water hooks somewhere deep inside her, a memory rising like a cold hand from the dark. She pushes it down. She needs her focus.

"Tracks?" The Lady asks, steering closer.

“None fresh,” Branwen answers stiffly, “They skirted this way earlier in the week, but nothing recent.” She dismounts to kneel near the mud, running a gloved hand along the prints. The edges have softened from the damp and she frowns, “They are moving deeper than expected.”

The Lady watches her with the calm intensity she always carries, a kind of quiet assessment that makes Branwen feel both studied and trusted.

“We keep moving.”

Branwen whistles low to recall the hounds. They fall back into formation, though several keep glancing at the treeline. The air feels wrong. Heavy. Expectant. She straightens, scans the far bank, and then mounts again.

They continue upriver.

The wind presses harder now, carrying the faint metallic edge of oncoming rain. The river beside them churns in slow, restless swells, swollen from the last week’s showers. It cuts across the estate like a dark, living boundary, wide enough that a small barge could drift across it without touching either bank. Most days it’s calm, harmless even, a glittering ribbon through The Lady’s vast holdings.

But Branwen knows better. She always avoids it during hunting parties. She knows what moving water becomes when weather turns. When memory turns.

The estate itself stretches out for leagues upon leagues. Farmland,

forest, old floodplains, long-claimed hunting grounds, and forgotten boundaries that only the oldest servants remember. The Lady rules all of it with a quiet, relentless precision. But even she cannot command the river. No one can.

Branwen tries not to look directly at it. But in her mind she sees it in flashes.

The roar of a river breaking its banks.

The sudden collapse of land underfoot.

Her Pa's voice swallowed by water and thunder.

Both her parents swallows by the rushing waves.

The cold, the mud, the silence that followed.

She focuses on the movement of the hounds instead, letting their discipline steady her.

One gives a sharp bark.

Branwen halts her horse, "Easy," She calls, raising a fist. The hounds freeze. The guards shift uneasily in their saddles.

Something moves across the water.

All riders tense, but the shape only resolves into a deer as it bounds from the far treeline into open view, ears flicking, startled by something none of them can see. It skitters down the bank, slips once on the wet stones, and then scrambles up a rocky slope before vanishing into the woods.

The Lady's voice cuts the tension, "Jumping at shadows?"

Branwen exhales through her nose, "Deer do not run like that without reason."

"Then the reason is ahead of us," The Lady says, "We proceed."

Branwen almost argues. Almost. Her tongue presses hard against the back of her teeth. But turning back now would leave the lower ridge unchecked. A misstep she cannot afford. Not with rumours of wolves. Not with the estate's borders at risk.

So she nods once, clicks her tongue, and guides the party further along the water's edge.

Something in the forest shifts. She feels it before she hears it, a prickling at the base of her skull, an old hunter's instinct waking like a blade sliding free.

The hounds feel it too.

They go still. Too still.

Branwen tightens her grip on the reins, every muscle drawing taut.

The river rushes beside them, restless and loud, slapping against rocks with the impatience of a thing that remembers drowning and taking.

She has the uneasy sense that the storm is not the only thing drawing in close.

The stable loft feels different now that it belongs partly to him.

Jonas continues sitting on the edge of the little cot Branwen cleared for him, the lantern burning softly on the beam beside him. Its golden glow warms the low rafters and the dust held in the quiet air, turning the loft into something gentler than it has any right to be. He has swept this place before— many times— usually while Branwen worked below, or when she ducked inside to grab tack or check on the dogs. But this is the first time he enters it as part of her post. As someone meant to sleep here. As someone meant to stay.

His chest tightens every time he thinks about it.

And maybe that's why sitting still feels impossible. This is his first day permanently in the stables and kennels, properly reassigned. No bell duty. No corridor rotations. No main-house errands. No endless list of small tasks waiting in every hallway. The absence of that constant hum of work disorients him more than he'd expected. The silence rings like a reprimand.

He remembers Branwen's words for the millionth time.

"Stay here. Look after the loft and the front stalls. Don't wander and take it easy for your first day."

He isn't sure if she truly meant it as protection against mirewolves. It would be quite a shock if any wolves traveled so deeply into estate grounds that they could get to the main stables and kennels. Still, he heard the undercurrent of her words.

So he stays.

With nothing to really do.

And the not-knowing of it gnaws at him.

"Take it easy for your first day," is an interesting conundrum. On Jonas's first day as a servant in the house, they tied his wrists together with a ribbon and told him to keep his hands steady. He had never quite had a day where he could outwardly relax. If someone accused him of being favoured now he's not sure he would be able to deny it anymore…

He rises because sitting only makes that gnawing worse. The animals have already been taken by the stablehands. The rest of the horses were moved to the south barn for safety, remaining hounds kenneled farther from the ridge while Branwen works the perimeter with The Lady. The stables and kennels are emptier than he's ever seen them, their absence leaving a ringing stillness behind.

So he cleans.

Not because anything needs it, but because it fills the space inside him that might otherwise float away.

He sweeps the loft again, though the floor is already spotless. He wipes down the railing. He folds the blanket on his cot only to unfold it and fold it again. He checks the lantern's oil twice. He straightens the little bundle of his belongings at the foot of the bed until they form a perfectly neat stack.

And when that's done, he hesitates at the top of the ladder.

The south barn needs sweeping. The carriage shed usually gathers leaves when the wind picks up. The tack room by the paddock always has something he could polish—

But Branwen told him to stay.

And disobeying her feels unthinkable.

Especially since they are meant to be wed—

Jonas's face burns and he shakes his head.

So he descends the ladder instead and moves only through the stables, boots clicking softly against the stone. He hangs up bridles no one has touched today. Brushes down Rilke's stall wall even though the mare won't be back for hours. Wipes muddy prints from a gate hinge. None of it is necessary, but the motions calm him. They feel like the safe corners of old rituals, like Quiet March training, but without the fear.

A flutter of sound draws his attention.

Up in the rafters, the birds have awoken.

It takes him a moment to spot them, small movements in the dim spaces between beams. Then one flits into the lantern glow: a little Cloudcap Whistler, grey-bellied, dark-throated, exactly the kind Branwen once pointed out with casual knowledge that had warmed him for hours afterward. One hops along a support beam, then another. They chatter softly in little bursts, feathers puffed against the cool draft sneaking in from outside.

And then he sees it: The nest.

Tucked high into the crook between two beams, woven snug and small. It's grown since the first time he noticed it. More fibres. More hay. A tiny bit of string someone must have dropped during tack repairs. He feels a swell of relief so sharp it nearly takes his breath.

They're still here.

Despite the storm coming.

Despite the move of the horses.

Despite the empty stables.

The birds stayed.

Jonas stands still, head tilted slightly. He remembers Branwen's voice, deadpan and unexpectedly gentle the first time she acknowledged his habit of looking up.

"They don't leave. Even when the weather gets bad."

And later, her offhand lesson, *"Chicks hiss when they're scared. Neat little trick."*

A second whistler hops closer, then glances down at him with a bright, sharp eye. Jonas lifts a tentative hand in greeting.

"H–hello," He murmurs.

The bird chirps once, quick and decisive, then flutters back toward the nest. The whole gesture feels like a blessing. Or a reassurance. Or simply a sign that some things, even tiny and fragile things, choose to stay.

Jonas swallows, throat warm.

He climbs back up to the loft, slower this time, feeling the weight of the day settle into his limbs. Not a bad weight. Just full. Full of the changes pressing in from all sides, some welcomed with others are terrifying, but all are real.

He sits on the cot again and finally allows himself to be still.

The rain has started, a faint whisper against the stable roof. Distant enough that it sounds gentle. Distant enough that he hopes Branwen is somewhere dry, or at least somewhere she's not alone.

He reaches for his bundle of belongings, intending only to shift it closer to the wall—

—and a slip of paper catches his eye.

Eliam's letter.

Folded neatly, tucked exactly where he placed it days ago. He's read it before, but seeing it now— *here,* in this place Branwen prepared for him— makes his stomach twist.

He draws it into his lap and stares at the familiar loops of his brother's handwriting. The curves of ink seem darker in the lantern-light, as though waiting. Expectant.

Jonas rests his thumb along the fold.

He knows he has to write back. He knows what he must say.

He sits with the letter in silence, the birds shifting softly overhead, the lantern glowing warm and steady beside him. Everything feels suspended. Everything feels like the breath before a choice.

Jonas closes his eyes, steadies himself with a slow inhale, and holds Eliam's letter just a little tighter.

The clouds finally press low enough that she can taste the storm coming.

Branwen leads the party along the narrowing riverbank, the ground softening beneath the horses' hooves. Mud pulls at every step. The river is louder than it should be for this hour, gnarled with rain yet to fall. The wind claws at her coat now, tugging at seams and stirring the ends of her braid where Jonas tied it so carefully earlier. The memory of his touch sits warm at the base of her neck, steadying and grounding, but it cannot quiet the instinct rising in her spine.

The hounds grow uneasy. Their formation slips in places. It's not enough to break discipline, but enough that Branwen feels their nerves like a trembling wire running through the pack. Tails low. Ears sharp. Bodies pressed closer to her horse's hooves than usual, as though trying to anchor themselves to her presence. Every shift of the wind earns a volley of quick, searching glances toward the treeline.

"They smell something," Branwen's voice is tight.

"So do you," The Lady replies dryly.

Branwen doesn't deny it.

She guides her horse closer to the water's edge. The river churns louder now, pushing against itself in thick, surging waves. It is swollen and restless, the kind of dark-bellied current that reshapes banks and

swallows fallen branches whole. The estate's river is wide enough that even at its calmest, crossing requires caution; in stormlight, it looks like a boundary between worlds.

Every time Branwen's gaze flicks toward that water, something old stirs under her ribs. She pushes it away before the memories can take shape.

Not now. Not here.

She forces her attention outward, toward the ridge. Fog drifts through the trees, thin at first, then thickening into bands that coil between trunks like something with intent.

A guard stiffens, "Movement."

Branwen raises her hand.

The party halts.

Every hound lifts its head, ears sharp, bodies angled toward the treeline.

At first, there is only stillness.

Then—

Low shapes slide between the trees, too fluid for deer, too quiet for

boar. They materialize in fragments. A flash of fur, a shifting shadow, the glint of a pale eye.

Branwen's pulse jumps.

"Wolves?" One guard whispers.

"Shite," Branwen mutters under her breath, "There's a lot of them."

She strains her eyes. The shapes spread out, fanning through the underbrush with calculated silence.

Mirewolves.

Larger than their mountain cousins, mirewolves move with a dense, rolling gait meant for sodden earth. Broad-shouldered, thick-coated, adapted for the marshlands farther south, they shouldn't be this far inland. A wandering pack can travel great distances late in a lean winter, but Branwen knows, down to the marrow in her bones, these wolves are not wandering. Something has drawn them here. They are following the party, testing them, measuring distance, numbers, the threat each rider and hound poses. The youngest hound trembles so hard her flank brushes Branwen's stirrup.

The Lady's voice remains steady, "How many?"

"Too many," Branwen answers, and even speaking the words tightens the air between the trees.

Fog slides through the undergrowth again. When it thins, three wolves have drifted closer. Then five. Then more— Slipping out of the forest in utter silence, as though the woods themselves exhale them into being. The storm thickens overhead, pressing low and bruised, darkening the woods until the boundary between fog and shadow blurs.

“Marshal,” One guard murmurs, “They’re forming a—”

“Circle. I know,” Her hand tightens on the reins.

The wolves’ movement is too deliberate, too coordinated to be chance. She has tracked packs before, but never one this large, this silent, this bold. Something drives them— hunger, territory, desperation— or some sharper instinct she cannot name. A prickling runs along her spine to the base of her skull. Every instinct tells her the pack is waiting for the right moment to collapse inward.

“Do we retreat?” The guard asks.

Branwen almost says yes. But the riverbank is too narrow to turn the horses safely. The forest behind is too dense for a clean withdrawal. And turning their backs would only trigger the charge.

No.

“We move forward,” She says, “Slowly. If we’re lucky, they’ll think we’re too many and keep their distance, and we can leave without bite marks.”

The horses step upriver, hooves sinking into damp soil.

The wolves follow.

Not rushing. Not attacking. Only closing the distance, watching with bright, hungry eyes, their breath drawing in the scent of horse and hound with predatory intent. A deep growl ripples through the hounds. A low and resonant sound that vibrates through the riverbank until Branwen feels it buzz against her calves through the stirrups.

Just need to get through… then go back to the estate and write that stupid witness report…

Then she sees it.

The leader. A female wolf larger than the rest.

Massive, scarred across the snout. Fur mottled grey and clay-brown, thick enough that the first drops of rain slide off her without sinking in. The mirewolf's eyes catch the dim stormlight with an unsettling glow; something pale, eerie, and almost reflective. Like a creature evolved to hunt in fog and thunder. She stands with a horrifying stillness, the kind born of absolute confidence.

That, more than anything, terrifies her.

For half a heartbeat, Branwen has a single, razor-clear thought:

Well. Shite.

Because a leader that size doesn't travel alone. And a leader that confident only steps into the open when she knows her entire pack has already taken position. The trees shift behind her. Shapes slide between trunks. Mud stirs. Hounds bristle. And the river snarls against the bank like it, too, wants them gone.

"...Marshal?" The Lady's voice is barely above a whisper, "How many is that?"

"Two dozen," Branwen answers, jaw tightening, "At least."

The Lady draws her pistol. The guards follow, steel glinting in the gloom. Far too little steel, far too few hands. *We brought four guards to confirm a sighting, not survive one.*

Not the brightest idea. Not with mirewolves already circling.

Branwen steadies Rilke with a sharp tug to the reins, keeping the mare angled between The Lady and the tightening crescent of wolves. She does not dismount; doing so would be suicide on a narrowing bank with the river roaring beside them and the forest boxing them in. Height is safety. Mobility is safety.

The leader lifts her head.

And the entire pack begins to move.

Her pistol is already in her right hand. Her knife sits ready at her thigh.

“Everyone,” Branwen says sharply, “Hold position. They’re closing.”

Rilke stamps, muscles bunching under Branwen’s knees, ears pinned flat. The hounds press in beneath the horses’ legs, bristling and growling as they instinctively form a living barrier around the riders’ mounts. Even their bravest tremble. They know the numbers better than any human eye— Twenty or more wolves, organized, confident, hunting as a single body.

The river thrashes beside them, swollen and loud. Mud splashes under the horses’ hooves. The forest feels as though it leans inward, branches creaking with the weight of storm.

The wolves shift closer by inches. Teeth flash white. Their breath steams in the thickening air.

Thunder rips across the ridge.

And then rain slams into them in a punishing sheet.

It takes seconds to drench coats and slick the ground beneath the horses. Rilke shies sideways as lightning forks across the river, and Branwen tightens her grip, keeping the mare from stumbling into the churning water.

Now the lead wolf lowers its head.

The pack tenses.

And then the mirewolves charge.

The rain is a steady drumming against the loft roof that makes the whole structure hum. Jonas sits hunched over the little crate Branwen once dragged up here to store spare blankets; for now it serves as his desk. The lantern glows beside him, warm and gold, haloing the rising steam of his breath in the chill air.

The paper lies flat beneath his hands. His fingers tremble a little, but he smooths the page anyway. He's written plenty of letters to his brother at this point, over the years, but never as often as he really should have. And never with this kind of weight. Never writing what he truly feels.

He dips the pen. Ink gathers at the tip. Rain patters overhead like a thousand small anxieties falling in quick rhythm.

He begins.

Eliam,

I am well. And I am eating properly, so you don't need to worry.

I hope you and Lina are well too. I've read your letter many times. I know you're scared. Anyone would be. It's a big thing you're standing on the edge of.

But I do believe you'll be a good Pa. I know that as surely as anything.

He pauses, breath catching. A bird shifts above him in the rafters, claws ticking softly against the beam. The sound settles him. He isn't alone entirely, even if Branwen is far away in the storm, somewhere beyond the ridge.

Jonas puts pen to paper again.

If I lived closer, I would help. I mean that. And I hope I can visit when the baby is born. I want to be there if I can.

But Eliam— I am not leaving the estate.

I'm sorry if that hurts you. That is not my intention. I'm not doing this to pull away from you. It's just… I have a life here. One I built myself. One I want.

I know you want me to be safe. To be looked after. But I'm not going to marry Lina's cousin. I don't want to meet her. I'm sure she is very kind, but I'm not looking for a match.

I've found someone. Here. Someone I care about very much. I'm not leaving her.

His hand slows. The ink pools at the end of the line, thickening before it finally dries.

Writing it plainly, without dodging or softening, makes something settle deep inside him. Like a stone finally placed where it belongs after years of leaning precariously.

He draws another breath and continues.

You will not lose me. I promise you that. I'll write more often. I want to hear everything about the baby, and Lina, and the inn, and every little thing you think isn't worth telling. You are my brother. That won't change.

But my life is here. I can't give it up. I don't want to lose you, but I can't lose myself either. I hope you can understand.

I love you.

—Jonas

He sits back slowly.

The rain is louder now. It's a deep, rolling force against the roof. Wind whistles through a small gap in the boards. A low rumble of thunder shivers through the beams above him.

Jonas folds the letter with steady hands.

He presses the crease carefully. Then again. And again, until it lies neat and perfect. Tidy in a way his thoughts have never been. He sets the folded letter beside the lantern to dry. For a long moment he simply sits in the dim warmth, listening to the rain. Feeling the truth he finally wrote settle around him like the quiet weight of a blanket.

He thinks of Branwen. Out there in the storm. Facing things she will

never admit she fears.

He touches his chest lightly, right over the quick thrum of his heart.

“I’ll w–wait,” He whispers into the quiet loft. “I– I’ll wait ri–right here.”

Thunder answers distantly.

And the lantern burns on.

The wolves hit like a collapsing wall.

Hounds surge forward in a tight defensive arc, their snarls ripping through the rain. Branwen barely has time to shout a command before the first mirewolf slams into the line; a huge, mud-dark shape with a broad chest and a scarred muzzle. The impact scatters the front hounds, paws churning up mud and river spray.

Gunshots crack through the storm.

The Lady fires cleanly from horseback, posture unshaken, her pistol flashing white-orange in the dim light. A wolf drops in the reeds with a wet thud, but two more rush in to fill the gap.

“Hold the line!” Branwen bellows over the storm.

A guards' horses rear, hooves striking at snapping jaws. The wind whips sideways, carrying gunsmoke, wet dog fur, and the metallic sting of river water. Branwen's coat is already soaked through, clinging to her shoulders as she fires her own pistol into the lunging mass. A wolf yelps, buckles, and vanishes beneath the swarm.

Another shape darts through the chaos— Too fast and definitely too deliberate.

A hound cries sharply.

Branwen whips her head toward the sound just in time to see one of the younger hounds dragged off its feet. The mirewolf clamped on its throat shakes once— twice— then flings the limp body aside. Mud splashes across Branwen's boots.

"Focus!" She snarls, kicking Rilke forward, and whistling a command to the hounds in the front. The mare plunges through the sick mud, ears pinned flat, teeth flashing as she snaps at a wolf that lunges for her flank.

But the wolves are coordinated.

Branwen fires her pistol, the recoil biting into her wrist. Another wolf drops. But the pack shifts in unison, moving to flank the guards. Their leader barks a guttural command. Shapes ripple through the storm as half the pack peels off, circling toward the horses' hindquarters.

"Left flank! Now!" Branwen shouts.

The guards wheel their mounts, firing into the encroaching line. Thunder rolls across the ridge, drowning half the noise. The river pounds harder against the bank, spitting mist into the air.

Branwen's throat tightens.

Rilke senses her tension and dances sideways, hooves slipping dangerously close to the water's edge.

"Steady— steady, girl," Branwen leans low, gripping the reins tight.

Rain lashes her braid against her spine. Wolves slam against the hounds again, claws raking, jaws snapping. One hound leaps onto a wolf's back and drags it down, but another is taken out by a coordinated strike: One wolf feints low while another tears the dog's throat open cleanly.

Blood hits the mud in a dark splash and spreads with the rain.

Branwen grits her teeth. That's three hounds down.

The hounds regroup instinctively, forming another barrier around the riders, but they're outnumbered, and wolves dart in and out like shadows, each attack measured, each retreat calculated. The ground shakes beneath Rilke as the mare charges through another wave. A wolf hurls itself at Branwen's stirrup, teeth snapping an inch from her boot. Branwen leans down and slashes with her knife, catching its ear and driving it back.

Another wolf barrels in from the right.

Rilke rears.

“Easy! *Easy—!”*

But the mare’s hind legs slip in the slick mud. Branwen’s balance pitches. The entire world careens sideways as Rilke screams and kicks out, trying to find purchase.

A wolf lunges for the horse's exposed stomach.

Branwen twists in the saddle and kicks the wolf square in the snout. It yelps, staggering back but Rilke, panicked, jerks violently.

The saddle jerks with her.

Branwen loses the stirrup.

“No—!”

The mare bucks again, hooves flailing, and Branwen is hurled backward. The world flips. Rain and sky and mud blur together. She hits the ground hard, all the breath punched out of her, mud splashing up into her hair, her coat, her mouth.

Her head rings.

Rilke's hooves crash down inches from her shoulder.

A wolf breaks the hounds' line and darts toward her fallen body, teeth exposed, jaws wide—

Branwen scrambles for her knife, fingers sliding through mud as the rain pours harder, the river roars closer.

The pack surges in.

The next crack of thunder hits so close it rattles dust from the rafters.

Jonas startles enough that the pen jumps from his fingers and clatters onto the floorboards. The sharp noise makes him flinch, hand flying to his chest as if he can press down the sudden, painful pounding beneath his ribs. The rain is a roar now. It slashes the roof in hard, slanted sheets that drum against every board, soaking the earth below in minutes. Wind threads itself through every crack in the loft walls, cold enough to raise gooseflesh along his arms.

He gathers the scattered papers, straightens them, stacks them perfectly. Normally the ritual of tidying would settle him— Smooth edges, even lines, the quiet orderliness that calms his thoughts.

Tonight it does nothing.

He keeps glancing toward the narrow window slit overlooking the yard, as if at any moment Branwen might stride out of the storm-laden

mist, hounds flanking her, braid swinging damp against her collar.

She should have been back by now.

Or maybe she shouldn't. He doesn't know how long perimeter sweeps take in a storm this heavy. But worry creeps through him all the same, slow and thick as rising water.

He paces the loft. Back and forth. Soft steps on old boards with lantern-light flickering across beams like restless shadows.Every creak below makes him jump. Every gust sounds too much like a howl. Jonas moves to the loft railing and looks down into the empty stable aisle. No horses. No hounds. No people. Just the muted smell of hay, the faint smoke from the lantern he left lit below.

The emptiness presses into him, heavy and suffocating.

He kneels by his cot and tucks Eliam's folded letter neatly into his satchel. A small, controlled action. Something with clear edges and purpose.

It barely helps.

He smooths the blanket on the cot until it lies without a wrinkle. Straightens the pillow. Adjusts the lantern's handle so it's perfectly centred. Opens and closes a small trunk. Checks the latch.

Still nothing.

Jonas grips the loft railing, leaning forward to listen.

Nothing.

Nothing—

Bang.

Not thunder.

A gunshot. A real one.

The faint crack slices thinly through the rain, unmistakable despite the storm's fury. Jonas freezes, breath caught high in his throat, hand clamped around the railing so tightly his knuckles whiten. Another shot. Then another.

His heart lurches painfully.

Branwen.

He doesn't think— He moves.

Down the ladder in a rush, nearly slipping on a rung. Across the stable aisle, past the empty stalls, past the rows of tack, one hand pressed hard to his chest as if he can keep his heart inside his body. He shoves the stable doors open with more force than he's used in years.

The storm slams into him.

Rain hits like thrown pebbles. Cold. Heavy. Immediate. His shirt is soaked in minutes, clinging to his skin. Wind drives needles of water into his face. Mud pulls hard at his boots.

But he doesn't falter.

He listens.

Beyond the treeline— *Crack.*

Another gunshot.

Something sharp coils in his gut. Jonas steps forward into the yard, boots sinking deep into the mud. Superstitions rise unbidden— Old hedge-warnings, childhood lessons whispered by candlelight.

Storm-wolves roam when the river hungers. Don't go calling into the trees when thunder drowns your name. If the wind howls like a beast, don't answer back or it'll think you're prey.

He ignores all of them. He takes another step toward the trees. Lightning flares violently above him, turning the forest edge into a jagged black line carved against blinding white.

For a second he thinks he sees movement.

A shape. A shadow. Something too large to be a guard's horse.

His breath cracks in his chest.

Another gunshot. This one sharper.

Jonas takes another step, almost stumbling as mud tugs at his boot. He shouldn't go into the woods. He knows this. The rules are absolute. Servants aren't allowed into the thickets during storms. No one goes unescorted— Certainly not with wolves out.

But fear claws through him with a ferocity he has never felt before.

He imagines Branwen alone. Her hounds scattered. The river churning beside her. The storm deafening her. Wolves closing in.

He takes one more step—

"Stop!"

A voice cuts through the storm. Two mounted guards thunder into the yard from the east gate, their lamps swinging wildly. Mud sprays from the hooves of their horses.

"You there! Back from the treeline!" One shouts, fighting to control her mount.

Jonas doesn't move. He can't. He's staring at the forest like it might swallow Branwen whole if he looks away. A pair of ground guards sprint up from behind the equipment shed, rain plastering their hair to their faces.

"What are you doing out here?" One snaps, "Get inside!"

"G–gunfire," Jonas manages, voice and body shaking, "O–out th–there —"

"We know," The guard cuts impatiently, looking at him like he's the biggest fool she's ever seen, "The Marshal's party sent distress shots. Reinforcements are moving."

Distress.

Jonas's knees nearly give out.

Before he can step toward the forest again, a guard grabs his arm, firmly enough to anchor him.

"You can't go in," She says over the roar of the storm, "You'll only endanger them and yourself. Stay here. Stay put. Do you understand?"

Jonas swallows hard, throat tight.

Lightning flashes again. The treeline stares back, dark and impenetrable. He almost runs anyway. Almost tears himself free and bolts into the trees. He can feel the pull in his bones, like something

ancient inside him is trying to drag him forward.

As if love itself is a kind of haunting.

But the guard doesn't let go.

"Inside," She says more gently this time, "Go."

Jonas stumbles backward, breath shuddering. He backs into the stable's doorway, unable to turn his back to the forest until the last possible second. He presses a hand to the wooden frame to stay upright.

The guards ride past him, disappearing into the storm, lamps bobbing like scattered fireflies swallowed by rain.

Jonas remains in the open doorway. Soaked. Shaking. Barely breathing.

Gunfire echoes again, distant but unmistakable.

He whispers another small prayer, old as childhood, cracked with fear.

"C–come back… ple–please come b-b-back…"

Behind him, the lantern still burns. Steady. Stubborn.

Just like the woman he's praying for.

A flash of teeth cuts through the rain.

Branwen's fingers close around her knife hilt just as the first wolf lunges for her face. She lifts her arm and drives the blade upward with all her strength. Metal meets flesh with a jolt that vibrates up her wrist. The wolf yelps, staggering sideways. Mud splashes over her cheek as it scrambles back into the fray, snarling in pain.

Before she can catch her breath, three more shapes barrel toward her.

She whistles.

The hounds answer at once.

The circle tightens around her with practiced precision. The oldest and strongest surge to the front, their bodies forming a living shield, snarls rolling through their chests in overlapping waves. The younger ones press closer to Branwen's heels, trembling but holding their ground.

Rain pours so hard she can barely see. The storm distorts everything. Shapes blur, movement thickens, and breath fogs the air.

A wolf throws itself at the circle. A hound leaps to intercept, the clash of bodies sending mud flying. Another wolf slips in low, trying to dart beneath a hound's guard, but Branwen slashes downward, catching it

across the muzzle. It recoils, lips curling, blood mixing with water.

“Marshal!” A voice rings through the storm.

The Lady.

Branwen whips her head toward the sound.

The Lady sits high in her saddle, back straight, hair plastered to her temples, coat soaked through. She moves with terrifying steadiness, guiding her horse sideways as two wolves try to flank her from the left. Her pistol rises in a smooth, unwavering arc.

She fires.

The nearest wolf drops without a twitch, shot dead center between the eyes. Even in the chaos, Branwen feels the impact of that shot. The Lady doesn't miss. Not at this range. Not in this weather.

Another wolf leaps for her stirrup.

A second shot rings out, clean and precise. The wolf collapses mid-air and hits the mud in a limp, sodden heap. But the pack does not falter. More shapes pour from the treeline, snarling, slipping through the storm like shadows that have grown fangs. In the midst of all the mud and rain, the mirewolves look like an endless sea of fur and snarling teeth.

A guard’s horse screams and rears. Another group of wolves swarm

the hindquarters, claws ripping through the saddle strap. The guard fires blindly, trying to keep the mare steady, but the riverbank is slicker now. The horse skids sideways, hooves sliding across the mud toward the rising water.

“Pull her back!” Branwen yells, but her voice is swallowed by thunder. The force of the rain almost blinds her.

The horse plunges into a shallow surge of riverwater before the guard drags it upright again, both rider and animal shaking with panic. Wolves seize the momentary weakness and launch another coordinated strike.

They’re trying to separate us. They’re trying to break the formation, like separating a calf from its mother and herd.

Branwen feels it in the rhythm of their movements.

Another wolf darts at her from behind. A veteran hound intercepts with a vicious snarl, but the wolf is heavier and catches her by the shoulder, pinning her into the mud. Branwen doesn’t think, she lunges forward and drives the knife through the wolf’s flank. It jerks, snarls in agony, and the hound scrambles free.

“Stay with me!” Branwen orders, voice hoarse and cracking, and whistles again.

The hounds tighten again. Bodies press against her legs, warm in the freezing rain.

Rilke slams past them suddenly, still panicked, still fighting unseen

hands. The mare's eyes roll white as she lashes out at a wolf trying to hamstring her. Branwen reaches for the reins, hope flaring— if she can get back astride, she can regain ground—

A wolf darts between them and snaps at her wrist. She jerks back, narrowly avoiding losing fingers.

Rilke screams and bolts.

Branwen watches helplessly as the mare disappears into the trees, two wolves chasing after her like ghosts.

Thunder shatters the sky again.

The Lady fires again, then again, emptying the second pistol. A guard swings her rifle up, but rain fouls the powder, and the shot misfires with a dull spit.

"The trees!" The guard shouts, voice barely carrying, "They're closing from the trees!"

The guards struggle to wheel their horses to cover Branwen, but the animals are nearly unmanageable now. All the horses slip in the mud, flanks heaving, eyes wild. The river rises another two inches in a single surge, breaking against the bank and sending cold spray over Branwen's boots.

Branwen's fingers close around the knife's hilt just as the mirewolf lunges. Its jaws slam shut on empty air where her arm had been a heartbeat earlier. She rolls onto one knee in the mud, driving the blade upward with a sharp, practiced thrust. The wolf jerks back with

a howl, blood streaking down its jawline, but it doesn't fall. It circles instead, dragging a forepaw, then lunges again.

A wall of fur crashes between them.

A hound barrels into the wolf's flank, snarling with reckless fury. Two more join a second later, forming a wedge that forces the wolf back toward the reeds. Branwen's throat tightens with relief. They know her position. They know their job. Even half their number down, they move like a single mind.

The ground vibrates with hooves and snarls and rain.

Branwen nearly twists her ankle when she tries to steady herself. Mud sticks to her coat, cold and heavy. Thunder continues crashing above her, drowning the sounds of horses rearing and the guards shouting orders. The Lady fires again— One clean, echoing crack that slices through everything.

Another wolf drops instantly, skull shattered.

Branwen doesn't have time to marvel at the precision. Another cluster of wolves explodes from the treeline, thick with rain-slick fur and mud-stained teeth. They sprint straight for the riders, splitting into two angled prongs. The guards try to adjust, but the horses slip in the deepening muck. One horse skids sideways again, hooves flailing. A guard clings desperately to the saddle as a wolf clamps onto the mare's hind leg.

"Hold formation!" The other guard shouts, firing wildly into the mass.

The wolves weave through the gunfire with frightening coordination. They dart in and out, striking at limbs and flanks, testing every gap in the defensive ring. Rain beats down in sheets now, washing blood into the mud until everything becomes a red-brown slurry beneath Branwen's boots.

The Lady's voice cuts through the storm, "Marshal, fall back!"

Fall back to fucking where? The river roars at her side, twisting, rising with each heartbeat. The water spits cold spray across her arm, and she flinches instinctively. The smell of it— iron-heavy and churning— snags something deep inside her chest.

A memory flashes. Her parents slipping underneath the surface of the water before she blinks it away. A wolf, seemingly sensing her split-second distraction, lunges about thirty feet to Branwen's left. The Lady swivels, aims, fires—

This time she misses.

The shot disappears into the trees. The Lady curses softly, but it does causes the wolf to retreat back slightly.

Branwen steps backward instinctively— *wrong direction*— water surges up her boots, cold and shocking.

Her breath stutters.

The river is too close. The mud is thinning. The current pulls at the edges of her footing. She forces herself forward again, deeper into the chaos of snarling bodies and kicking hooves.

A mirewolf breaks through the line, heading for The Lady's horse.

"On your right!" Branwen shouts.

The Lady pivots in the saddle, fires again, and this time the bullet punches through the wolf's shoulder. It tumbles, snarling, but gets up again. It limps but is still coming, teeth bared, eyes locked on Branwen with a terrible, almost human focus.

She raises her knife to meet it, but the mud beneath her heel shifts in a sudden, sucking slide. The river has chewed the bank soft, treacherous, the kind of mud that pulls at boots and doesn't let go. Her foot skids sideways. Her balance tilts.

She slips.

The wolf slams into her chest with a force that knocks the breath from her lungs. Its weight is enormous. Thick muscle, bristled fur soaked with rain, and the reek of wet predator forces her to stagger back, boots gouging trenches in the flooded earth as she fights to stay upright. Its claws rake across her coat, skittering off leather only because she twists at the last second.

Teeth snap inches from her throat.

She jams her forearm up under its jaw to brace it away, pain flaring instantly where the jaws clamp down on her sleeve, crushing rather than piercing, a low warning of what will happen if it gets a clearer grip. Its breath is hot and rancid, steaming in the freezing rain. Mud splashes up her back as she's forced down to one knee, her boots scrabbling for traction.

The river growls behind her, a deep, hungry pull that vibrates through the ground.

The wolf's weight drives her closer to the water with every thrash.

"Marshal!" The Lady's voice cuts through the storm, sharp as a whipcrack.

Branwen hears the hammer cock back and in that split second, she recognises the wolf pinning her as the leader. Huge. Scar-muzzled. Storm-grey fur clotted with mud, her yellow eyes fixed on Branwen with a cold, assessing intelligence that is nothing like animal frenzy. A matriarch. A commander. Every other wolf's movements echo hers.

Branwen twists her torso, shoving the wolf's head sideways with everything she has left. The wolf snarls, jaws snapping again, so close she feels the crack of its teeth through the fabric of her sleeve. Rain blinds her in thick sheets. Mud slicks over her fingers, making the knife handle shift and threaten to slip from her grip. The wolf's breath is hot and foul against her throat.

Another snap— Its teeth scrape across the backs of her knuckles and she almost loses her handle on the knife.

Gunfire rips the air. Too close.

The wolf jerks as the bullet punches straight through its ear and bursts out its cheek. Not a kill shot. Not even a slowing wound. Just enough to make the creature howl with a voice like tearing metal, its fury taking physical shape.

It surges forward with renewed ferocity.

Its massive head slams into her ribs and its claws hook into her coat, dragging her sideways— Toward the churning lip of the riverbank where swollen water claws hungrily at the mud. The ground gives under her knee, slick and collapsing, the river surging louder behind her.

The river roars behind her, not merely sound, but memory. The night she has tried to forget her entire adult life. It becomes thunder and wood cracking, and her Pa's voice shouting above the rising flood.

"Get up the rise!"

The river behind her sounds exactly the same as that night. The air smells the same, that sour and metallic scent that storms dredge up from deep in the soil. The river had swollen the same way, greedy and impatient. Branwen's teeth grit. Her pulse spikes into a painful, panicked rhythm, but the panic never reaches her limbs. Not anymore. She shoves upward, twisting her body to break the wolf's leverage.

But the beast is heavier. *Stronger.*

Its weight crashes down again, forcing her elbow into the mud. Rain slashes across her face like thrown gravel. The river snarls behind her, close enough she can feel its spray against her back.

A shadow shifts above her— The Lady, high in the saddle, her pistol raised.

“Marshal— down!”

Branwen tucks her chin and drags the wolf with her, instinct and training moving before thought—

Bang.

White heat erupts through her upper arm.

The world snaps apart.

She doesn’t hear her own cry. The impact is a brutal, concussive punch that rips through her upper arm and scatters her senses like snapped twigs. Her entire body jerks sideways into the mud. The wolf’s jaws slide off her sleeve as she falls.

Her arm won’t respond. It simply buckles underneath her.

The wolf whips toward her exposed throat, lips peeling back.

But The Lady’s misfire— disastrous as it is— gave Branwen a heartbeat of distraction. A single, irreplaceable heartbeat.

Hounds explode into the wolf’s flank. Two, maybe three. Their jaws clamp down with savage, desperate precision. They drag the matriarch sideways, jaws full of her fur, snarls melding into howls. The mud churns beneath their struggle. Rain slams into Branwen’s face, washing nothing away.

She tries to rise, but the pain hits properly now. It's full, unrelenting, and white-hot. Her vision pulses. Her stomach twists as the world tilts around her like a skiff on a rising flood. Blood streams warmly down her sleeve, mixing with cold rain in a sickening swirl. Too much of it.

Her ears ring.

The Lady's horse rears and slips in the mud, hooves splashing dangerously close to Branwen's head. The Lady clings to the reins with white-knuckled desperation, face ashen.

"Marshal!"

Branwen jams her good hand into the mud and pulls. Pain lances down her arm, sharp enough to black out the edges of her sight. But she drags herself upright anyway.

The river behind her roars. The same roar. Her breath heaves. Her teeth grind.

Not this time.

The hounds are still fighting— Short, brutal cries tearing from their throats as they clamp onto the lead wolf, dragging and wrenching with all their weight. The matriarch thrashes violently, muscles bunching under her thick, scarred pelt. One hound is flung aside with a yelp. Another hangs on by its teeth, hind legs scrambling in the mud.

Branwen forces one knee under her. Then the other.

Her arm screams. Her breath rasps. The river moves like something alive.

The matriarch surges upright in a single, horrifying burst of strength.

And the hounds lose their hold.

The lead wolf shakes free, mud spraying in wide arcs as their jaws slip from her hide, whips her huge head toward The Lady—

—and charges.

A flash of massive shoulders. A blur of fur. Her jaws yawning open, wide enough to crush a skull.

The Lady is already off-balance, her boot slipping from the stirrup with a sharp, startled cry. Her pistol, slick with rain, nearly drops from her grasp as she reloads it. She tries, desperately, to raise it again, but her fingers tremble so violently she can't even steady the aim.

And for the first time since Branwen has known her, The Lady looks afraid.

The wolf lunges.

And her teeth find flesh.

The wolf's jaws clamp around The Lady's calf. The sound is sickening, a wet *crunch* swallowed by the roar of the storm. The Lady screams, shock-struck and pale, as the wolf jerks her sideways with terrifying force. The mare rears, panicked and nearly toppling. The Lady slides in the saddle, leg trapped in the wolf's mouth, her grip slipping, her body moments away from being dragged off the horse and into the mud.

The wolf braces her massive paws, preparing for a full-body wrench that will tear The Lady off her mount altogether.

Branwen doesn't think.

She moves.

Her name for this kind of motion is older than training. Older than discipline. A reflex born in the river's undertow, in floodwater pulling at her ankles, in the memory of being powerless. She will not be powerless again. Not while The Lady— who could ruin her life at a whisper— bleeds under the jaws of a predator.

Her boots skid in the churned mud as she hurls herself between The Lady and the wolf.

They collide mid-air.

The matriarch's momentum is a battering ram. It slams into Branwen's chest with bone-shaking force, folding her, crushing the breath from her lungs. For a heartbeat she's sure her ribs have cracked. She tastes

blood. Rain. Mud. Wolf-fur.

And then they hit the ground, sliding down the riverbank in a violent, tangled mass of limbs and teeth and rage.

The Lady topples sideways in the saddle but manages to cling to the horn with a strangled gasp, her wounded leg spurting crimson. The matriarch released her only because Branwen's impact knocks the wolf off its target, but the damage is done: torn leather, torn flesh, and a gash deep enough that The Lady groans through clenched teeth, trying not to pass out.

Branwen doesn't spare her a glance.

Because the matriarch is already twisting beneath her, jaws snapping, fury incarnate.

The wolf's jaws snap inches from her cheek, its breath rancid with blood and hunger.

Branwen's hand finds her knife—

The wolf lunges for her face.

And Branwen drives the blade under its ribs.

Once.

Twice.

Then again.

Then again.

Until she loses count.

The matriarch's fur is so dense she feels the resistance against the layers of matted coat, scarred hide, and thick muscle. Every plunge sends a shudder up her arm— Blood, hot, thick, startlingly warm against the cold storm— splashes across her knuckles and runs down the soaked leather of her bracer. The wolf snarls low in its throat, a sound so deep it vibrates through her ribs, a dying animal refusing to accept the end.

She twists the blade on the next strike.

The matriarch's breath bursts out in a wet, rattling choke. Something inside her gives— a lung collapsing, a rib cracking, air and blood mixing into a gruesome gurgle. The wolf's hind legs kick wildly, claws carving trenches into the mud. Her front paws slam against Branwen's shoulders with desperate, fading strength, each impact jarring her spine.

Branwen doesn't stop.

She can't.

Not when the wolf's jaws are still opening and closing, teeth snapping inches from her face even as her movements slow. Not when the river roars so loudly behind her she swears it's speaking in her Pa's voice. Not when her own heartbeat is a frantic drum against her ribs, urging her— *live, live, live—*

Another stab. Another twist.

The matriarch jerks violently, a final tremor rolling through her massive frame. Her breath shudders out thick and bubbling. Blood spills in a dark sheet across Branwen's lap, diluted instantly by the rain.

Then the wolf's weight collapses fully onto her. The fucking thing is *enormous.*

She gasps, shoving upward with her good hand, forcing the body off inch by inch until she can slide out from beneath it. Mud sucks at her boots as she drags herself upright. Her vision flickers black at the edges. She stands in a slurry of rainwater and blood that pools around the matriarch's open rib wounds.

The wolf's eyes, once bright with vicious intelligence, glaze over as the last twitch runs along its flank.

Branwen sucks in a breath that tastes like iron and rain.

Her fingers clamp tighter around the knife hilt. Her whole arm shakes. She can't tell if it's from blood loss, pain, or the adrenaline scraping her nerves raw. Probably all three. She pushes herself upright, her injured arm hanging limp, her coat ripped open across the shoulder. Her sleeve is soaked red to the elbow— her blood, not the wolf's— and it drips steadily into the mud.

But she stands.

Knife raised.

Hounds gather around her— wounded, panting, trembling, but alive. Their teeth are crimson, their eyes blown wide with the remnants of the hunt. They form an uneven circle, chests rising and falling in ragged unison.

The remaining wolves circle at the edges of the clearing—

Then—

One of them stops.

Its nose lifts.

It scents the blood.

Its head tilts.

A low whine rolls out of it. It's not fear, not submission, but something ancient. Something like recognition. Another wolf approaches the fallen matriarch cautiously, hackles half-lifted. It extends its muzzle, touching the matriarch's shoulder.

She doesn't move.

The wolf huffs, a sound somewhere between a growl and a keening note. It pulls back, ears flattening. A ripple travels through the pack. Small movements, lowered heads and shifting paws. A language older than the estate, older than the river, older than every story Jonas ever whispered about the fair folk. Rain sheets across the riverbank, turning the mud into a shifting, sucking pit, but the wolves stand with an eerie, soldierly stillness. Their eyes glow pale in the stormlight, vertical pupils narrowing like blades. Their breath curls in thin mist from blood-slick jaws.

The pack begins to withdraw.

They fan out in a crescent, staring at Branwen with pale, unblinking eyes as the rain streaks down their muzzles. The stormlight catches on their pupils, turning each gaze into a narrow, eerie reflection of the river. They look at her. They gaze at the mud on her knees, at the blood soaking her sleeve, at the knife still clutched in her shaking hand.

At the wolf she killed.

Then, one by one, they back into the trees with quiet steps sinking into the undergrowth.

The still living hounds snarl, but weakly, their bodies too battered to do more than show their teeth.

Another wolf pauses at the treeline, its ribs heaving. Rain beads along the jagged scars over its flank. It fixes Branwen with a stare that feels almost human. It's slow, thoughtful, seemingly memorising her shape, her scent, the way she stood her ground.

And then it turns and melts into the shadowed forest.

The last remnants of the pack fade into the storm-dim woods, leaving only the pounding rain, the churned mud, and the enormous corpse cooling at Branwen's feet.

The sudden absence of snarls leaves her ears ringing.

Branwen's knees almost buckle. She forces her boots deeper into the mud, anchoring herself. The river behind her howls. The edges of her vision pulse. Her injured arm throbs with a sickening, pulsing heat, each heartbeat shoving fresh agony down to her fingertips. Blood runs in steady rivulets, diluted by rain. The hounds shudder where they stand, chests heaving, flanks streaked with their own blood and the wolves'. Two lie still in the mud— one with its throat opened, one twisted at an unnatural angle— both brave, loyal things who fought until their last breath. A third drags itself forward, whining low, trying to crawl back to Branwen's boots as if needing proof she's still alive.

Dead wolves lie scattered across the clearing, dark smears of fur among the churned muck. Bullet holes on some. Knife wounds and bite marks mar others. The storm lashes everything into a single shuddering tableau. Mud, bodies, breath, blood, rain, all mixing into the same dark slurry.

She steadies herself with one hand braced against her thigh.

Her braid— Jonas's careful, earnest braid— is hanging in tatters, mud-soaked and unravelled, strands stuck to her cheek. She reaches up instinctively, fingers brushing the ruined length.

A ridiculous thought flashes through her:

Jonas braided this for me. Now it's ruined.

She almost laughs. Or sobs. It's hard to tell which her body wants.

The guards, who had been locked in their own brutal fights on the edge of the clearing, finally recognize that the pack is gone. They rush forward at once. There's shouting. Names are called, weapons lifted, boots splashing through muck. Someone bends over one of the fallen hounds, shouting for a surgeon who isn't here. Someone else checks a fellow guard who isn't moving.

But most converge toward only one figure: The Lady.

She's half-collapsed against her mare. The animal sidesteps in agitation, nearly spinning as flashes of lightning split the treeline again. The Lady forces the reins tight, murmuring sharply until the mare stills enough for her to dismount.

Her injured leg drags after her. Each step leaves a thicker smear of blood in the mud.

Rilke is still gone. Vanished into the trees. No sign of her white blaze through the rain.

Branwen assumes her mare is already torn apart somewhere deeper in the forest. Mirewolves rarely let their prey run far.

The Lady limps towards her. The wolf's bite is already swelling through the leather of her boot. Branwen watches her come with a distant fog creeping behind her eyes. Her lungs feel too tight. Her skin is too cold. The river is too close.

"Marshal," The Lady says hoarsely, struggling for breath, "You're bleeding."

Branwen looks up slowly. Rain blurs her vision into streaks of silver. Her whole body trembles from effort, adrenaline, and the memory of a river that tried to kill her once already and succeeded in taking two others.

"You shot me," She says.

The Lady recoils as if Branwen slapped her. Her eyes widen. Her mouth opens. A stuttering breath escapes her.

"Marshal— I was aiming for the wolf, you were beneath it, I never— I would never—"

"It happens," Branwen's voice stays steady only because she is too close to breaking to allow it to crack, "I moved. You fired. It happens."

But the words mean something else underneath: *You nearly killed me. And you know it.*

The Lady's face collapses, "Marshal…"

But Branwen is breaking somewhere deeper, somewhere old.

The river surges behind her, swollen and hungry. The same pitch. The same undertow. Her pulse riots. Her breath hitches. The storm wraps around her in suffocating waves. Her pulse riots. Her breath shudders unevenly. The storm wraps around her like a closing fist.

Her Pa's voice shouts through the thunder once more—

"Get up the rise!"

Her lungs seize. Branwen's knees hit the mud before she realizes they're folding. Her vision tilts and smears.

"Marshal—!" The Lady stumbles forward in alarm, reaching for her.

"Don't."

It rips out sharp, too sharp, cutting clean through the downpour. The Lady freezes, hand hovering mid-air. The guards freeze too, but not because of Branwen. She doesn't think any of them are near enough to hear over the rain. Instead, The Lady signals for them to stay, as she fixes Branwen with a more levelled look.

Branwen shudders out a long exhale. Her good hand braces hard against a fallen log, nails digging into the soaked bark. She drags another breath in and out. Then another. Then another— Each one scraped raw through a throat that suddenly feels too narrow to hold air.

Until the world steadies by inches.

Until the storm becomes just weather again, not a grave yawning open at her back.

Then she forces herself upright.

Every muscle shakes. Every drop of blood down her arm feels like it's spilling from her soul.

But she stands.

She staggers toward The Lady. Not with aggression, but with a desperate, collapsing steadiness. The guards tense immediately, but all they see is a wounded Marshal trying not to fall assuming she's grabbing The Lady only for balance.

They're wrong.

She grips the front of The Lady's lapels, enough to anchor herself. Enough to draw The Lady close. Enough that her voice will reach her and no one else.

The storm ensures every guard hears nothing. Her face is soaked. Her braid is unravelled. She bleeds freely down her arm. Her entire body shakes with cold, pain, and fury held on a thread.

"You listen to me."

The words barely cut through the storm, but they land. The Lady goes absolutely still, breath halting, eyes widening just slightly beneath the sheet of rain pouring down her face. Branwen's voice is low, hoarse, scraped raw against the inside of her throat. But even drowned by thunder, it carries a force that makes The Lady straighten on instinct.

"I am not doing this anymore. Not like this."

Rain beads on The Lady's lashes, trembling there. Her hair, normally pinned immaculately, is plastered to her cheeks in dark, wet ropes. She says nothing. Maybe she can't. Maybe she's afraid that if she speaks now, she'll say something that will shatter what little composure she has left.

Branwen tightens her hold on the lapels of The Lady's coat. She can feel the fabric sopping wet beneath her fist. Every inch of her own sleeve is soaked in blood and stormwater; her arm trembles uncontrollably, fingers barely cooperating.

But she keeps her grip.

"You will give me a last name," Branwen says, each syllable carved from exhaustion and buried history, "I will pick one for *myself*. You will put it in the estate books. Make it official."

Lightning cracks overhead, so bright it flashes the mud banks white.

Branwen's jaw locks. Her voice dips even lower.

“I’m not pretending I don’t need one anymore.”

The Lady swallows. Rain streaks down her face like she’s crying, though her expression is too tight, too stunned for tears. Her injured leg shakes under her; the wolf’s bite has already seeps through the boot, crimson blooming dark in her stocking.

Branwen presses onward before The Lady can find her voice.

“And you will approve a cottage. The old barn by the pasture. Restore it,” Her breath shudders, a mix of fury and pain radiating from her shot arm, “Jonas and I are not living in a broom closet while you fret about impropriety.”

The Lady opens her mouth, perhaps to apologize, perhaps to object, perhaps to give some reflexive noble excuse. Branwen doesn’t let her.

“You nearly killed me,” A beat, “And I nearly died saving you.”

That hits. Hard.

The Lady flinches, visibly and sharply. Her gloved hand twitches at her side as another ripple of pain travels up her bitten leg. One of the guards, seeing the movement, steps closer protectively, but The Lady lifts a hand to halt her. Her eyes never leave Branwen. Thunder rolls so loudly the ground seems to shake with it. Rain pounds the leaves and the churned mud, splashing against Branwen’s face with cold needles.

“I have earned my name,” Branwen says, “And Jonas has earned a home.”

The Lady's eyes shine— Rain? Guilt? Fear? Branwen can't tell through the sheets of water blurring both their faces. The storm steals clarity from everything except Branwen's voice. And that voice softens, not from weakness, but something more dangerous. More truthful. Stripped of everything but the bare, furious want beneath it.

"We will marry when we're ready. Not when you decide it's convenient. Not to tidy up your household ledgers. Not because you fear gossip."

The Lady closes her eyes. For a moment she looks older, tired in a way Branwen has never seen. When she opens them again, something in her posture has changed. Something yielding, something real.

Then she nods. Once.

"You have my word," She says quietly. And Branwen feels— actually feels— that she means it.

Branwen releases her coat. Her fingers slip away, and her strength goes with them.

Her knees buckle. She crashes down into the mud. It splashes up her thighs, cold and thick, sticking to the shredded remains of her coat. Pain detonates through her arm so sharply she sees a white flash behind her eyes. Her breath catches in her throat, strangled.

The Lady reaches instinctively for her—

Branwen jerks back.

“I’m walking back to the estate,” She mutters. She feels half delirious at this point.

“You need a surgeon,” The Lady insists, voice low and shaken. She’s limping badly now; two guards hover behind her, ready to catch her if she falters.

“I need to get back,” Branwen heaves out, the words scraping against her throat, “Someone is waiting for me.”

Jonas’s face flashes behind her eyes—

His soft, careful voice whispering, *“I’ll w–wait.”* His hands tying her braid with reverent, trembling patience. The way he stood behind her, breath warm against her neck, as though every strand he wove was something sacred. The way his fingertips lingered, shy but sure, like he wanted to give her steadiness even if he couldn’t name it.

She sees him hovering beside her in the stable doorway, cheeks flushed, trying so hard to hide how boldly he’d reached for her. She sees the earnestness that softened his whole expression when he brushed straw from her coat, as though tidying her was an honour. She sees the way he held the door for her— awkward, blushing, determined— as if the smallest courtesy he could offer her meant something monumental.

And then she sees what she fears most—

Jonas standing where she left him, hands fidgeting at his sides, eyes

fixed on the treeline with the kind of anxious, brittle hope she's never had anyone direct toward her before. Waiting. Truly waiting.

He trusts her to return. He expects her to.

And that thought hits harder than the wolf's teeth ever did.

Branwen grits her jaw, pain thrumming through her arm and ribs, but the image of him pulls her forward like a hand at her back.

The sound of crashing footsteps jolts the clearing as the backup bursts through the trees— Mud-splattered, panting, weapons bloodied. They take in the carnage: wolves torn open, hounds lying still or whimpering, the churned earth soaked in red and rainwater. Their gazes snap to The Lady, horrified at the bite on her leg, then to Branwen— soaked and trembling.

Branwen pushes herself upright fully. She sways again, catching herself on a tree root.

"I'm fine," She lies.

No one believes her, but no one dares contradict her.

The Lady watches her, no longer with command or superiority, but with something closer to awe. True awe. And something else: Guilt in its rawest form.

"We will speak later," The Lady says softly, almost reverently.

“Yes,” Branwen replies, “We will.”

And then— Bleeding, shaking, her hair undone, coat ruined, the storm biting at her heels, the river roaring behind her like a nightmare she refuses to drown in—

Branwen turns toward the estate.

And she walks.

The storm dies slowly and reluctantly, like something that doesn’t truly want to leave.

By mid-afternoon the sky hangs low and heavy, clouds wrung out and sullen. The downpour softens first into rain, then into mist, then finally into a thick, uneasy stillness. Water drips steadily from the stable roof, the sound rhythmic enough to be maddening.

Jonas has worn a path into the floorboards from pacing.

Forward, turn, back. Forward, turn, back.

His chest hurts from holding his breath in strange, panicked increments. He had lit the lantern hours ago— far earlier than necessary— because he couldn’t stand the dimness creeping over the rafters. He told himself it was to make the loft welcoming, the way he

promised he would. But every time the flame flickers, he finds himself checking the door again, listening for footsteps, for hounds, for anything.

He has not eaten. He has not sat. His palms sweat and his throat feels too tight.

The world outside the stable door holds only silence and the heavy drip of water from the gutters.

He tries to tidy the front stalls, but his hands shake too much. He folds and refolds the one blanket he brought. He checks to make sure the cot Branwen set up for him hasn't somehow collapsed. He opens the lantern again. Closes it. Opens it. Adjusts the wick, though it doesn't need adjusting.

Then he stands at the door again, fingers gripping the frame.

When hoofbeats finally sound down the path, he nearly collapses with relief.

He straightens immediately— Then freezes.

Something's wrong.

The hoofbeats are slow. Dragging. Not the crisp rhythm of a hunting party returning triumphant. They sound… uneven. Lopsided. Like some of the riders can barely keep their horses moving.

Jonas presses a hand to his mouth.

Then the figures emerge through the thinning mist.

First the guards.

Not all of them.

The ones who appear look scraped raw. Their faces are pale, eyes wide, uniforms torn. Mud streaks their sleeves. One leans heavily against another in the saddle. Jonas's heart stutters painfully.

Then the hounds. The survivors.

They limp and stagger at the heels of the horses, heads low, muzzles stained with something dark. One of them is missing patches of fur, another favouring a badly bitten leg. Their formation is sloppy, nothing like their usual disciplined movement, and that's somehow more terrifying than blood.

Jonas's fingers go numb.

Then The Lady rides into view.

Her posture is too stiff. Too controlled. As if she's holding herself together with sheer will. One of her stockings is soaked through with blood. Her pistol is missing. Her hair— *The Lady's hair*— is plastered to her cheeks in wild, rain-heavy strands.

Jonas's stomach drops to his knees.

Then he sees Branwen.

His breath leaves him.

She walks behind the last rider, not on Rilke— because Rilke is nowhere to be seen— but on her own unsteady feet. Mud cakes nearly every inch of her. Her coat is shredded. Her left sleeve is soaked entirely red. Her braid is completely undone, her hair hanging in tangled ropes over her shoulders. She looks… smaller somehow. Or maybe it's the way she leans slightly to one side, as though her arm can no longer bear its own weight.

Her eyes are downcast. Her jaw clenched hard.

She looks like she survived a war.

Jonas doesn't remember moving.

One moment he's frozen in the doorway, and the next he's sprinting across the muddy yard with a speed he didn't know he had. He nearly slips, catches himself, and pushes harder.

A guard steps into his path to intercept him, but Jonas barrels past her with more force than he's ever used in his life.

“B–Branwen!”

The cry tears out of him high and thin, like something ripped from his chest.

Her head lifts.

He crashes into her before she can fully turn, arms going around her waist, almost knocking her back with the force of it. She gasps, a small sound of pain, but her good arm comes up immediately, fingers clutching the back of his coat.

Jonas buries his face against her sternum, breath shuddering out in broken bursts, “You—y–you’re h–hurt— you’re—B–Bran—Branwen—”

He can’t get the words out. They come in fragments, splintered by sobs. His fingers dig into the back of her torn coat as if he needs to physically confirm she’s solid, alive, *here.*

She lowers her chin until it rests on top of his head.

The movement is small. Weak. But it is her.

“I’m all right,” Her voice is frayed at the edges, “Jonas. I’m all right.”

“You’re n–not,” He chokes, pulling back enough to look at her—

And instantly wishing he hadn’t.

Her arm is a disaster of congealing blood and rainwater. Her cheek is scratched raw. Her lips are pale, cracked. Mud clings to her eyelashes in thick, trembling specks, the kind that only appear after someone has hit the ground hard.

“You’re n–not,” He repeats, almost angrily this time, tears spilling fast, “Y–you’re n–not, you’re—”

Branwen’s expression softens— More than it ever has in front of others. Something unguarded flickers through the pain.

“Jonas.”

It’s almost a whisper. Almost a plea.

He hears it. He hears *everything* in it.

Jonas cups the uninjured side of her face with both hands, thumbs trembling against her cheekbone. His breath shudders. His lips part but can’t shape the words.

“P–please don’t—don’t e–ever—”

His throat closes. Whatever he meant to say collapses. He presses his forehead to her jaw instead, shaking. Branwen exhales, breath catching in a way that tells him just how much pain she’s holding back. He feels the strain in every muscle she tries to keep still.

Behind them, guards dismount. Someone calls for a physician. Someone else begins rounding up the injured hounds, voices sharp with urgency. The Lady leans heavily against a guard, murmuring clipped orders even as her bitten leg buckles beneath her.

But for this moment, the world shrinks to just the two of them— her ragged breathing, his shaking hands, the stubborn, impossible relief between them.

Branwen lifts her good hand and curls it gently— so gently— into his hair.

The gesture unravels him completely.

He sobs again, full-bodied and helpless, like the fear is ripping free after hours of being caged behind his ribs.

“Jonas. Jonas, hush, I’m here.”

“Y–you w–weren’t,” He cries against her shoulder, “Y–you w–weren’t, and I—I thought—”

He can’t finish. His chest convulses instead. His whole body trembles against her.

Branwen uses her thumb to brush mud from his cheek, though she only smears more onto him with her filthy glove. A quiet grunt escapes her as she tries to steady herself.

“We’re both here now.”

He nods desperately, clinging to that simple truth as though it’s the only thing keeping his lungs functioning. Then she sways. Jonas’s arms tighten instantly, supporting her weight with his scrawny frame. He’s far too small for this— far too weak— but he sets his feet and holds her anyway.

“B–Branwen!” He gasps.

“M’fine,” She lies, worse than before.

“You’re n–not,” Jonas insists, terrified, voice climbing in pitch.

Across the yard, The Lady straightens with effort. She gestures sharply at a guard.

“See to the Marshal. Fetch the surgeon. I’m returning to the house.”

Her leg shakes as she turns, but she keeps her spine straight, refusing to limp as she’s helped toward the manor. The remaining guards scatter to their assigned tasks, giving Jonas and Branwen a wide berth, as if instinctively recognizing the charged, private gravity of the moment.

Branwen turns back to him, eyes softening again in the space of a heartbeat.

“Jonas,” She murmurs, voice tapering low, meant for him alone, “I

need to sit down. Before I fall down."

He makes a small, panicked sound and nods furiously.

"O–okay. Y–yes. S–sit. You can— I'll— I'll help, I'll h–help—"

He slips under her good arm, guiding her slowly and carefully toward the stables. She leans heavily on him, but not too much. Even now, she's trying not to crush him under her weight. Inside, the lantern he lit earlier casts a soft gold across the shadows.

Jonas helps her lower onto a bale of straw. She's shivering violently now, post-adrenaline and post-shock. He grabs the blanket from his cot, hands fumbling, and wraps it around her shoulders, careful to avoid her injured arm.

She watches him, strangely gentle. Strangely still. The storm in her posture quieting, if only for a moment.

"Jonas."

His name leaves her in a rough whisper— Soft, but certain enough that it cuts straight through the panic boiling in his chest. He lifts his head. Her face swims into clarity through the blur of tears he hasn't managed to blink away. Her eyes are half-lidded, exhausted, but fixed on him. On him.

She lifts her uninjured hand. He almost flinches because he thinks she shouldn't waste any strength on him. But her fingers brush his cheek, feather-light, and he goes still. Her touch is warm even through the grime on both their skin. His breath catches painfully in his throat.

“I love you.”

Right now, those words feel like a lifeline thrown straight into the hollow panic inside him. His chest folds inward. His eyes sting again, uselessly, so he squeezes them shut. A sound escapes him, embarrassingly soft, half a sob. He covers her hand with both of his, terrified he imagined it, terrified it will fade if he doesn’t hold it gently in place.

“I… I know,” He whispers, voice breaking despite his effort to steady it. He covers her hand with his, thumb tracing the dirt along her skin as if reassuring himself she’s solid, “I—I love y–you too. S–so much.”

He leans down— slowly, cautious of any wounds he can’t see— and presses his lips to hers. It’s not the desperate kiss he gave her the first night she pulled him into her room, nor the uneven, laughing one behind the stables. It’s gentler, trembling, a kiss that says *you came back,* a kiss that tries to pour all the frantic, shaking gratitude in him into a soft place on her mouth.

She answers with a sigh, her lips warm despite the cold. Her fingers slip from his cheek to his jaw, anchoring him closer for a heartbeat.

Outside, guards move around the hounds, boots scattering straw. The Lady’s distant voice drifts toward the kennels, clipped and controlled as always. Morning wind parts the storm clouds above them, letting in pale streaks of light that catch on Branwen’s tangled hair.

Branwen leans her head back against the wall, breathing unsteadily— But breathing. Alive.

Jonas kneels beside her, unwilling to let go of her hand for even a second, not even when an estate surgeon comes to patch her up.

Neither of them speaks for a long time. The quiet is the gentlest thing either of them has felt all night.

At last, in a voice barely louder than a breath, Jonas says:

“I’m n–not l–letting you go t–t–to the f–forest again. N–not alone.”

Branwen huffs a tired, aching laugh through her nose.

“I’ll do my best.”

“You b–better,” He whispers fiercely.

She closes her eyes. It looks like relief. Real, tired relief.

He stays beside her, shoulders touching, fingers wound around hers, with lanternlight flickering softly across the two of them.

Chapter End Notes

https://ko-fi.com/sanguia

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Perhaps Branwen shouldn't be surprised she caught the flu after being out in a storm like that.

Trudging home through a mire of blood and rain, half-drowned and frozen, and very much leaking from her arm. *Yes,* in hindsight, that was practically an engraved invitation for illness. But it still feels like an insult, lying under a blanket with fever while the estate whispers about her brush with death like she wrestled with some god.

She'd insisted she was fine. Absolutely fine.

"I was only shot in the arm, Jonas," She'd said.

And Jonas— poor, sweet, gentle Jonas— actually looked like he was going to slap her.

That shut her up. Suffice to say, she let him fret for the rest of the week.

And fret he did. Worry hanging off him like an apron, following her from bed to chair to bed again; hovering with broth, cloths, tea, blankets, more blankets, a third blanket— she still doesn't know where he found that one— and a constant, trembling mutter of *Y-y-you're still c-c-cold, M-M-Miss Branwen… p-please l-l-lie down.*

She had thought he dropped the *Miss* part, but apparently not. She doesn't mind, though it does make her feel tingly in a way she can't explain nor is she sure she *wants* to explain.

Regardless, she'd been too exhausted to fight him. And maybe— just maybe— she liked having someone fuss over her without treating her like she might crack. Jonas doesn't coddle. He cares. There's a difference.

A week later, she's upright again. Her arm aches in damp weather. She wakes in the night with flashes of yellow eyes and snarling teeth. But she's healing. And Jonas has finally stopped flinching every time she scratches her nose.

Which brings them to now.

The morning sun throws pale gold across the stables and kennels, the smell of hay and warm animal breath wrapping around them like something familiar and safe. Jonas stands at the makeshift cooking station the stablehands helped assemble. Someone brought a battered pot from home, someone else contributed firewood, and Branwen herself argued with Maud until she allowed them ingredients, a corner space for the coals, and permission to light a fire.

The place is still a stable. But it's starting to smell like food.

Brenna, muck fork in hand, inhales dramatically, "Damn, this is nice. Hot breakfast without trudging all the way to the kitchens? Didn't know I could feel spoiled in a barn."

Branwen snorts, "Then you'd better be grateful."

Brenna grins, “I am! I swear it.”

“No, properly grateful,” Branwen jerks her chin toward Jonas, “He’s doing all the cooking. Don’t you dare take it for granted.”

Jonas goes pink to the ears.

Brenna blinks, then raises both palms in surrender, “Gods above, all right! Thank you, Jonas.”

He gives a small, shy nod, stirring the pot gently. It smells like porridge with dried berries. Something simple and warm, perfect for a cool morning. He’s humming under his breath, soft and tuneless, but happy.

Branwen’s chest loosens.

The entire estate knows about their *“sanctioned courtship”* now— she still bristles at the phrasing— but Jonas looks lighter these days. The other servants smile at him instead of tiptoeing around him. The stablehands already adore him; he’s been doing their laundry, their mending, their cleaning, and now their breakfasts. Branwen has made it unambiguously clear that anyone who so much as sighs rudely in his direction will answer to her.

Possessive? Maybe. She can live with that.

Jonas glances over his shoulder at her, catching her staring. He gives her that soft, private smile, the one that warms her down to her boots.

“H–how are y–you feeling?” He asks quietly, “Y–your arm hu–hurts?”

“Only a little,” She lies.

He narrows his eyes. She sighs, “Fine. More than a little.”

Jonas scoops a spoonful of porridge, blows on it, and offers it to her.

Her.

Branwen, Hunting Marshal, slayer of mirewolves, now apparently being hand-fed breakfast in a barn.

She leans down and takes the bite from the spoon.

Jonas lights up, bright as a lantern. Brenna looks away like she’s intruding on something private, and Branwen pretends not to notice any of it. The storm is gone. The wolves are dead or keeping their distance. Her fever has passed.

And Jonas is here, solid and warm and real, cooking breakfast at dawn like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

He offers her another spoonful, “It’s a l–little sweet,” He says, “S–so you’ll eat m–more.”

Branwen huffs, “I eat plenty.”

Jonas tilts his head, patient in that way that always disarms her, “Y–you lost a l–lot of bl–blo–blood.”

“Not that much. It’s also been a week.”

He gives her a look that could shame a god. She grumbles but opens her mouth for the second bite.

He beams and unsurprisingly, her chest does something very undignified.

Before she can gather her dignity back around her shoulders, a hound barrels toward them with an eager bark— A new big tan-and-black drooler bought to replace some of the hounds they’ve lost, currently being poorly handled by Esther and tail thumping like a war drum. Esther skids in behind her, cheeks already flushed with effort.

“Esther,” Brenna groans, “Tie her up before she takes Branwen’s good arm off.”

“She doesn’t bite!” Esther protests, “She just… tastes things!”

The hound promptly licks Branwen’s injured sleeve.

Branwen goes very still, “Esther.”

“Yes, Marshal?”

“Remove your hound.”

Esther grabs the dog by the collar, heels digging in the straw, “Sorry! Sorry, she loves blood! I mean— she loves *you!* Not— you know—”

Brenna plants a hand over Esther’s mouth, “Stop talking.”

Jonas is laughing silently, shoulders shaking as he tries to keep stirring.

Branwen glares at them all, but even she can’t hold it. A smile cracks across her face, small and crooked. Months ago she thinks she would have reprimanded the stablehand, now— Gods, she’s gotten soft. But it doesn’t feel too bad… Not that she would ever admit it out loud.

Jonas ladles porridge into bowls and hands one to Brenna, who accepts with a sheepish thanks, and another to Esther once she successfully wrangles the hound away.

He hands the last bowl to Branwen with deliberate care.

“F–for you,” He murmurs.

Her heart does a stupid little flip while she goes warm down to her boots.

But someone clears their throat at the barn door.

Branwen turns.

Maud stands in the opening, immaculate despite the morning chill, dark skirts crisp, apron clean, hands folded neatly over a ledger she does not appear to have needed but somehow carries anyway. Her expression is professional, but her presence cuts through the stable like a bell.

“Marshal,” Maud says, voice smooth and authoritative, “A message from the main house.”

Branwen straightens instinctively, “What message?”

“The Lady requests your presence in her study,” Maud’s gaze flicks, briefly, to Branwen’s bandaged arm, just enough to acknowledge it but not enough to show concern, “She is well enough to receive you.”

Jonas’s hand stills on the ladle.

Branwen feels the shift in him without turning to look.

“Her leg?” Branwen asks.

“Improving,” Maud replies, “And her fever has subsided. She was… displeased to be confined to bed. You may imagine.” A faint, almost invisible twitch at the corner of her mouth, “She has been waiting for you.”

Jonas's fingers worry at the hem of his sleeve. Branwen places her hand over his.

"I'm fine," She tells him quietly, "And this is just… the business of it. Nothing to worry over."

He meets her eyes, "Is it… Y–your n–name?"

She nods.

He swallows, visibly trying not to fret, "C–come straight back."

"I will," She brushes her thumb over his knuckles, "I promise. And I'll be all right."

He nods, but it's the kind of nod that means he'll worry anyway. She squeezes his hand once more, then straightens, adjusts her coat, and steps out of the warm barn air into the cool morning.

By the time she reaches the main house, the world feels quieter again, like the estate is still remembering how to breathe after the storm. Servants move softly in the hallways, their eyes flicking to Branwen's arm before darting away with quick nods of respect.

When a maid opens the double doors to The Lady's study, Branwen steps inside.

The Lady's study smells like ink and wet leather, the air still carrying the faint chill of the wet season. The windowpanes are streaked from

the earlier rainfall from the night before, droplets dried to cloudy smudges. Outside, dusk settles in slow and heavy, a muted violet light slipping through the trees. The hearth crackles weakly, damp logs releasing the last of their steam as they catch.

Branwen sits stiff-backed in the chair before the desk, her freshly bandaged arm throbbing in rhythm with her pulse. She'd tried re-braiding her hair before coming, but half the plait had unravelled on the walk, leaving her looking like she'd wrestled another mirewolf and only mostly won. Ridiculously, she thinks, *wish Jonas could braid my hair again.*

The Lady sits across from her.

A ledger lies open atop the desk. Estate parchment with neat lines, inked by a scribe's precise hand. The column for *Given Name* already holds: *Branwen.*

The space beneath, labeled *Surname,* waits for her. Empty. Expectant.

The Lady pretends to read another document, but Branwen can feel those sharp grey eyes flicking up now and then, quietly watching, quietly assessing. Waiting.

Fine.

Branwen rests the quill pen against the blank line.

A last name.

Her last name.

It *should* be simple. Put something down, get it written in the books, and be done with it. It isn't as if she grew up with one. She barely cared or thought about such things back in her village, and after her parents died, she cared even less.

But now… Jonas. His face flickers in her mind, his worry-crinkled brow, the gentle patience he uses like a shield, the way he touches her wrist as if grounding himself. The thought steadies her fingers and shakes them all at once.

She exhales slowly and thinks, *All right. I can do this.*

Her mind wanders, uninvited, toward her sisters.

Hesta, the eldest— Branwen tries to imagine what she would look like as an adult. That sharp, commanding voice that sliced through chaos better than any spear. Hesta who always seemed older than she was; who scowled like she'd invented the expression. Has she successfully become a bookkeeper somewhere?

Meinwen— Small, dart-quick, could turn a glare into a threat that sent girls twice her size scattering. Meinwen who scraped her knee every three days and hid it under her clothes because she *"didn't want Hesta to fuss."* What did she become…? Branwen can't recall where she left to, not truly.

Where are they both now? What do their faces look like, aged over the years? How would they see her?

A tightness curls in Branwen's throat.

And now here she is, choosing a name without them. Her sisters ought to be here elbowing her, offering advice she doesn't want, telling her she's doing it wrong.

Her brow furrows.

What if she honoured them?

Hesta. Meinwen.

Hes–wen?

Mei–sta?

She mouths it.

"Hestamein," She murmurs under her breath, and immediately grimaces. Damn, it sounds like a swamp disease.

If I ever find them, they'll skin me alive if I've saddled myself with that.

But the thought of them, alive somewhere and still hers, pulls at her chest. A soft, surprising heat. She hasn't let herself imagine their faces in a long time. And yet here they are, stubbornly resurfacing as she holds a pen. A longing so old it feels new again.

She gives a quick, unwilling smile. A little crooked thing she hides by looking down at the parchment, blinking away emotion that threatens to spill over her eyes. She doesn't need to do *that* in front of The Lady.

All right. Not that, then. I like my hide intact.

She taps the quill pen's end against the desk.

What name has meaning? What name belongs to her?

Her gaze drifts toward the window. The rain from last night has left streaks along the glass, warping the dusk light into wavering lines. Beyond the wall, beyond the kennels and pastures, she can sense the river. Even without seeing it, she knows when it's running high. She can smell the silt and churn in the air, she can feel it in her bones: That low, rumbling heaviness.

The ford.

The river's pull.

The cold rope of panic wrapping around her ribs as her childhood ended in front of her.

Her parents going under.

Branwen's stomach twists. For a moment, she is sixteen again, lungs

burning, limbs thrashing, the roar of water filling her skull. She feels the river swallowing the world, mud and branches and screaming.

She grips the edge of the desk until her knuckles whiten. Even puddles over her ankle make her pulse spike. The smell of riverweed makes her jaw clench. When storms gather, she feels it first as nausea, then as dread.

And yet the memory stands stubbornly in front of her now, refusing to leave. Her first instinct is to recoil from the thought of taking any name tied to water.

Her second instinct, stubborn and furious, looks that memory straight in the eye.

That river didn’t get her.

She survived.

She built a life on the other side of it.

She found Jonas on the other side of it.

Her spine slowly straightens.

Rhydderch.

"From the ford."

A name claiming the place she crossed and kept going.

Not owned by it. Not haunted by it. Defined by the walking forward.

Branwen Rhydderch.

It feels like flint catching. She sets the quill to paper, and her hand doesn't shake now. Her handwriting is slow and careful— she isn't used to signing anything but hunting reports— but the letters come out clean.

Branwen Rhydderch.

She thinks of Hesta's approval disguised as scolding. She thinks of Meinwen's tiny hand wrapped around hers. She imagines of her parent's voices, deep and warm, telling her *you're stronger than you think, Bran.*

She thinks of Jonas whispering, *"S-sometimes you j-just... survive,"* with a warm and steady hand on her trembling arm.

And she thinks:

This is mine.

The Lady looks up the moment she finishes the last stroke. Her expression does something small, almost imperceptible, something

that might be approval. Respect, even. Branwen caps the ink pot and nudges the ledger back toward her.

"It's done," She says quietly. Her sisters can kick her ass about the name later, if she ever finds them, and for the first time in years, she lets herself hope she might.

The Lady studies the name, then nods once. She clears her throat— Quietly, almost delicately. It's the sort of sound she rarely makes. Normally she speaks with crisp, controlled precision, but right now her voice is smaller.

"If that is the spelling you prefer," The Lady says, fingertips resting lightly on the desk, "I will have the name sent to the Hall of Registry by courier. It will arrive before the end of week."

Branwen arches a brow. The Lady's tone is perfectly formal, but the edges are frayed. Not cracked, not broken, but softened in a way Branwen has never seen from her. A hairline strain across steel. And Branwen knows exactly why.

It's the arm.

The bullet. The fact that The Lady's aim slipped in the rain and tore a hole through her Hunting Marshal.

But it's more than that. Branwen sees it now— The other, quieter shame sitting beneath the first. It has taken years for The Lady to grant her a name. Not because she doubted Branwen's worth, but because Branwen was an afterthought. A useful tool. A pair of hands. A blade pointed outward.

Was she ever someone The Lady expected to truly keep until recently?

The realization sits strangely in Branwen's chest. Not painful. Just… true. And The Lady knows it too. Knows exactly what this timing says. Still embarrassed. Still shaken. Still too aware of the bullet, and the years she let Branwen stand nameless without thinking twice.

"And that's it?" Branwen asks.

"That is the start," The Lady corrects gently, "Once the Hall records it, the provincial ledger will reflect your change in status. From there, citizenship is automatic. Your work permit converts, your hunting licence updates itself under the new file, and the estate will receive a notice confirming the transition." She hesitates, "Then I sign that final document and send it back."

Branwen nods once, "Quick."

"Yes." The Lady's gaze drops to Branwen's injured arm, "Given the circumstances, I thought… speed was appropriate."

Branwen doesn't make her say it. She lets the silence sit, long enough for it to grow uncomfortable. Long enough for The Lady to shift in her seat, shoulders tightening under her coat.

Then Branwen adds, "So, you're skipping the ceremony."

The Lady's head lifts, "You requested that. I honoured it."

It isn't a reprimand. Or judgment. It's oddly neutral, like she's reminding Branwen that she made a choice and The Lady respected it. *Ceremony.* Gods.

She remembers Maud's ceremony from years ago, long before Branwen had earned the right to stand under the same roof. Maud, who scrubbed floors and managed the household with military precision, being dressed up like a sacrificial lamb in starched linen so her new name could be stamped on her like a seal. A name bestowed, not chosen. Gifted to her by The Lady in front of witnesses. A performance meant to make a servant look grateful.

Maud had kept her chin high, but her hands shook the entire time.

Branwen had been there in the shadows, watching. And she'd thought, *Never. Never for me.*

No. Absolutely not.

"Good," Branwen says, "I'd rather not swear fealty for the privilege of owning my own last name."

A beat of quiet.

Then, unexpectedly, The Lady huffs. Something soft and startled. Almost a laugh. Almost.

"It *is* a flawed system," She allows, voice gentler than Branwen has ever heard it, "One that relies too heavily on the whims of landholders."

Branwen tilts her head, “Meaning: you.”

“Meaning those in my position,” The Lady says, though a faint colour rises on her cheekbones. She slides the ledger toward herself and scans the signature again, as if reassuring herself it’s real, “Citizenship should not be contingent on whether a noble finds someone ‘fitting’ or convenient to claim.”

Branwen lets a small, humourless smile tug at her mouth.

“Imagine that. Rights not depending on how much a noble likes your face.”

The Lady lips press together, but not in disapproval, more in a rueful kind of agreement.

“A radical notion,” She murmurs.

Branwen snorts, “I try.”

She considers adding something sharper, something about nobles teaching the colonies about the Dominion’s version of rights while hoarding their own, but she’s tired. Tired in her bones. Tired enough to want peace instead of provocation.

So she lets it lie.

The Lady seems grateful for it.

Another silence settles. The hearth snaps faintly with damp logs. The Lady traces one finger down the margin of the ledger.

“When the final document arrives, I will sign it personally. It will list you as Branwen Rhydderch, Hunting Marshal of the Amaranthe Estate. Your citizenship number. Your full rights within the Dominion. And should you choose to marry— ” She pauses, almost imperceptibly, “—that will be recorded under the same surname.”

Branwen sits back, folding her aching arm close to her ribs, “Jonas will be relieved to know he won’t have to become Jonas… Hestamein.”

The Lady blinks. “…Hestamein?”

Branwen waves a hand, “A terrible idea. Don’t ask.”

“I… see,” The Lady sounds like she very much does not see, but wisely moves on. Her voice softens, “Marshal… Thank you. For what you did.”

Branwen shrugs with her uninjured shoulder, “You would’ve done the same.”

“No,” The Lady answers quietly, “I wouldn’t have survived long enough to try.”

Their eyes meet, briefly and sharply, and The Lady's composure bends again under the weight of it. Gratitude. Guilt. And something like respect, tempered by the knowledge that she owes Branwen a debt far larger than a surname.

Branwen looks away first, "Send the papers. I'll sign whatever I need to sign. Then I'd like to go."

"Of course," The Lady inclines her head, "Jonas must be waiting for you, I presume."

"He is," Branwen stands slowly, steadying herself on the chair, "And he worries enough for three people, even when I'm somewhere that doesn't need any worrying."

"I imagine he does," The Lady says quietly.

Branwen turns toward the door.

Behind her, The Lady adds, "Branwen Rhydderch… It suits you."

Branwen doesn't turn back.

But her lips twitch.

Just once.

The morning feels too bright.

Sunlight gleams off every wet surface— fence rails, puddles, the slick curve of the pasture grass— until the whole world looks freshly washed and unsettlingly sharp. Yesterday's rain still hangs in the air, cool and metallic, but the sky has gone a startling clear blue, as if the estate wants to pretend the night never happened.

Jonas has already swept the barn threshold three times, but he sweeps it again anyway. Fussing feels easier than standing still. Fussing feels like breathing. The stablehands had thanked him for breakfast, which made his chest feel warm, and he has now done everyone's laundry, but it's not enough. He's organized the feed sacks, straightened the water buckets, folded a pile of blankets even though most of them didn't need folding.

Branwen has told him before that he doesn't have to make it perfect. But the thing is, he wants to.

He's halfway through stacking three crooked planks by the wall when a shout cuts the air clean in half.

"Oi! Stop right there— Hands where I can see them!"

Jonas jolts upright so fast he drops the boards. His heart leaps to his throat. The shout came from the far side of the pasture, near the copse of pines bordering the estate.

Boots pound. Metal scrapes. A guard swears.

Jonas steps out of the stables and kennels fully, squinting toward the noise. Sunlight gleams on wet grass. Two guards have someone pinned against the fence post… Someone in a long travelling coat, mud up to the knees, hat half-askew, face half-hidden as they struggle.

Jonas's stomach lurches.

No. No, that can't—

But then the man's voice cracks through the air, panicked and all too familiar.

"Please, unhand me! I swear I'm not trespassing— I'm looking for my brother!"

Jonas goes cold. Before he realizes he's moving, Jonas is already sprinting across the pasture. His foot catches on a divot. He stumbles, corrects, forces his legs faster despite the stitch blooming under his ribs. The guards turn at the sound of his approaching footsteps, hands still braced on Eliam's shoulders.

"Sir," One guard says— *sir,* Jonas almost trips from shock, he almost looks behind himself to see who they're addressing. People have only started calling him that when his courtship with Branwen was officially declared by The Lady— "Step back. This man was trying to force entry onto estate lands. He refused to state his business."

"I—I–he's n–not—" Jonas gasps, trying to catch enough breath to speak, "H–he's my b–brother!"

Eliam's head jerks up.

His face is flushed, hair plastered with sweat, mud speckled along his jaw. But under all of it— under the panic, the indignation— there's that unmistakable resemblance. The same shape of cheekbone. The same slant at the corner of the eye.

"Jonas?"

Jonas nods frantically, "P–please—p–please let him—let him go, he's n–not dangerous."

The guards exchange a look. Jonas recognizes both of them, shift-watchers from the night of the storm, the ones who saw Branwen limp in half-conscious and saw Jonas hovering behind her like a frayed shadow. The same guards who've started stepping aside when he walks with Branwen. *"Hunting Marshal's future husband,"* One of them had called him once, and that was *important,* like that alone made Jonas a force of nature.

Now they look at him like he has the authority to decide what happens next.

Jonas feels heat crawl under his collar. His pulse jumps painfully.

Finally one guard releases Eliam's arm.

"If he's yours," The guard says, "He may speak with you. But any further breach of the perimeter will result in detainment."

Eliam straightens instantly, outrage swelling like a puffed rooster, "I

wasn't breaching anything! I clearly stated my business—"

"We can release him to you," The second guard says louder, shutting Eliam up. She shifts her weight, studying Jonas with a steadier look than he's used to receiving, but it tells both him and Eliam that she's speaking with Jonas and that Eliam should keep his mouth shut, "If you're comfortable with that."

Release him.

Release him— *to Jonas.*

Like Jonas is the one with jurisdiction here. Like Jonas is the one who can say yes or no. The sudden authority given to him because he's linked with Branwen makes him feel a little lightheaded.

But he nods. Carefully.

"Y–yes," He says, "Th–thank you. I'll… I'll t–take it f–from here."

The guards incline their heads slightly.

"If you need anything, call,"One says, "We'll be on the west rounds."

Jonas nods again, trying not to tremble. He steps forward, fingers lightly gripping Eliam's sleeve, "C–come on," He murmurs, tugging him away gently, "C–come in–inside…"

Eliam's posture collapses at the touch, deflating like air leaking out of a bellows. Jonas leads him to the stables and kennels, far enough for privacy, but close enough that the sight of stablehands in the fields and open doors keeps his nerves anchored. When they reach a nearby beam, Eliam exhales a long, shaking breath.

In the time since the attack, The Lady has doubled the number of guards patrolling the lower fields and the ridge paths. Hounds stalk the perimeter three times a night. The wolves might linger at the edges of the woods, but they won't come this close again. Still, Eliam sneaking around may be unsafe.

"Eliam, you c–can't j–just wander near the r–ridge," Jonas says quietly, "Th–there are m–mirewolves. Real ones. They k–killed three hounds and nearly—" His breath catches, "Y–you can't do that."

Eliam doesn't move. He looks… smaller, somehow. As if the humiliation of being marched across the pasture by two armed guards has wrung all the bluster out of him. His face is pale except for the red blotch climbing his throat, the one he gets when he's overwhelmed.

Jonas softens immediately. Too immediately.

And when Eliam finally speaks again, it's not about mirewolves or guards.

"Gods, Jonas…" He scans him up and down, "Look at you. You look __"

Tired, Jonas expects. Or thinner.

But Eliam says, with sudden, raw intensity:

“You look alive.”

Jonas opens his mouth, unsure what to do with the warmth and ache that hit him all at once.

Then Eliam surges forward and crushes him into a hug.

Jonas freezes. Then, slowly, he softens, arms lifting to hold his brother back. Eliam smells like wet wool, horse dander, and travel-dust. Like childhood winters. Like something Jonas once clung to without realizing it.

Then Eliam’s grip tightens— hard. Almost frantic.

“You wrote that letter under pressure, didn’t you?”

Jonas jerks back so fast he nearly falls.

“W–what?”

Eliam’s eyes flash with certainty, “You had to have. Jonas— *‘you have a life here’?* You? At an estate? *‘Someone you care about’?* Someone keeping you from leaving? Of course they made you write that letter —”

Jonas inhales sharply, “N–n–no—no one f–forced me. I s–swear.”

“Then why did the guards treat me like I was threatening the bloody Lady’s heir? Why are you shaking? Why are you— Jonas, tell me the truth.”

“I *am* t–telling y–you the tr–truth.”

Eliam’s expression buckles, not with anger, but something worse. Something terrified.

“Jonas,” He says, softer now, “Is someone hurting you?”

Jonas feels his throat close. A tremor runs through him, exhaustion, frustration, something hot and helpless.

“I’m n–not hurt,” He manages, the words thin as thread, “I’m… I’m h–happy.”

Eliam stares at him as though the earth has tilted under his feet.

“Happy…?”

It’s barely a whisper.

Jonas nods too quickly, “Y–yes.”

But Eliam’s face twists, disbelief fighting heartbreak.

“Jonas,” He says, voice breaking, “You trembled every time the door opened when we were boys. You flinched at shadows. You’re the type to apologize for breathing too loud,” His jaw clenches, “Happy is not — this isn’t— you don’t have to pretend with me. I know you.”

“I’m n–not pr–pretending,” Jonas whispers.

Eliam steps closer, hands hovering, then gripping Jonas’s arms as if to anchor him, “Let me start over. I came here because I wanted to talk. Not to fight. I was upset when I left the inn and I followed the road like an idiot and I didn’t realize how far I’d gone.”

He swallows hard.

“This person you found… Is she… is she kind?”

The words are quiet.

And they are heavy.

Jonas’s heart gives a small, painful kick.

“Y–yes,” He says.

Something in Eliam loosens, only to clench again.

“Is it— is it *her?* That brute of a Hunting Marshal? You’re choosing her, this place, over family?”

Jonas gasps, hurt blooming sharp, “N–no! I’m ch–choosing my l–life. I’m choosing… choosing m–myself.” He forces the words out, trembling, “I d–don’t w–want to leave. I d–don’t want a match with L–Lina's cousin… I d–don’t want—” He stops, calming himself, and looking at Eliam more firmly, “I w–want *this.”*

Eliam stares at him, stunned. Absolutely undone, “You’ve never chosen anything,” He says faintly, “I didn’t think you knew how.”

Jonas stiffens as if struck. And Eliam’s face crumples with immediate regret.

“That— that came out wrong,” He runs a shaking hand through his hair, leaving it in chaotic tufts, “I need to start over again. Jonas, gods, I’m sorry. I don’t mean— I just—” He clears his throat awkwardly, expression twisting in discomfort, “I’ve been so bloody terrified.”

Eliam’s mouth trembles.

“Of losing you,” He continues helplessly, “Of waking up and realizing you’d slipped away while I wasn’t looking. You know that Lina wants to try for a baby. She’s excited. She’s ready. And I— I don’t know if I’m enough for that. I thought… if you were close, if you were safe, if I could still look after you, then maybe I wouldn’t—” He stops, voice breaking, “Maybe I wouldn’t be so bloody scared all the time.”

“E–Eliam,” Jonas replies softly, “Y–you don’t h–have to look after me.”

Eliam's face twists, not in indignation this time, but in something rawer and thinner.

"I know… I know I don't," A breath. Then, even softer, "I'm sorry. I wasn't there for you. Not really. Not when we were boys. I should've helped more. I should've helped more but I… I just didn't."

Jonas's throat closes— Shock, confusion, something like old grief catching on its way up. Eliam presses on, words tumbling in a rush he can't contain.

"And when you were sent away and I got married to Lina… I decided I'd fix everything I hadn't done right," He shakes his head, hands flexing at his sides, "I made myself your keeper. I talked over you. I made plans for you. I told myself it was care, but it wasn't— it was me trying to undo years of being a coward."

Jonas's eyes widen. Eliam continues, shuddering like the words are a bruise he's been hiding.

"When Lina said she wanted a baby, all I could think was: I can't even take care of my own brother. How could I ever take care of a child? So instead… I clung to you even harder. I told myself if you lived close, if I could watch you, if I could somehow fix your stutter, then maybe I wasn't the useless, frightened man I felt like. And when your letter came, I panicked. I thought someone was forcing you. Or worse, that you didn't need me at all. It was the first time you've ever told me no like that. You were— so assertive with what you wrote."

He gives a broken laugh.

“You terrified me.”

A long, trembling quiet settles.

Jonas breathes in, then out. Slowly. Carefully.

“I’m not ch–choosing someone to… to r–replace you… Or ab–abandoning family. I’m st–staying… I w–want to stay. I’m n–not choosing it to h–hurt you. I’m choosing it b–because it’s the first place that feels like m–mine. I j–just… f–found someone who sees me. And lets me s–speak for myself.”

Eliam’s eyes glisten, “I never let you speak for yourself, have I?”

“N–not often.”

Eliam lets out a breath, his lips forming in a self-deprecating smile. It’s shaky, even humbled, but released somehow.

“I want to do better,” He says, “I don’t want to lose you. But I don’t want to cage you either.” He hesitates, voice trembling with sincerity, “Tell me what you need from me. Tell me how to be your brother without… smothering you.”

"J-j-just… st-stand with me. And l-let me st-stand too."

“Yes— I can do that.”

“And v–visit,” Jonas adds, suddenly shy, “But through the p–proper gates. W–with permission.” His lips twitch, “N–no more sneaking like a t–thief.”

Eliam groans, scrubbing both hands through his hair, “You didn’t see them advancing like a pack of oxen—”

Jonas snorts— actually snorts— and Eliam snaps his gaze to him, startled and warmed all at once.

“That,” Eliam says softly, “Is the happiest sound I’ve heard in years,” He huffs, something close to a chuckle, then looks at Jonas fondly, “Fine. The next time I visit, it’ll be with dignity.”

Jonas gives him a look.

“Or with… some dignity.”

And Jonas smiles, small and warm and sure.

“But next time you send a letter,” Eliam mutters, trying for dry humour and failing miserably, “Write *‘I’m alive, safe, and not kidnapped by a big scary woman’* at the top of the paper so I don’t scale a bloody fence.”

Jonas lets out a fragile laugh.

“O–okay.”

“And tell the guards to stop arresting me since they clearly defer to you in some way.”

“T–they w–only d–did their job.”

“Whose side are you on?”

“Y–you w–were s–neaking.”

“I was worried!”

Jonas’s breath stumbles, the words hitting him with more force than he expects. Eliam grunts out something unintelligible, clearly rattled, then says after a beat, “So…So it’s really her? The— the Hunting Marshal?”

Jonas nods, “Y–yes.”

Eliam lets out a faint wheeze, “Right. Fantastic,” His hands flap uselessly at his sides before he straightens his coat, as if that might save him, “I need to apologize to her immediately. Properly. Preferably before she… skins me.”

Jonas’s brows pinch, “She w–won’t. N–not unless you d–deserve it.”

Eliam shoots him a wounded look, “Not reassuring, Jonas.”

But then something shifts in his expression. Silences stretch between them. His shoulders soften, guardedness slipping just slightly.

“And you…” Eliam says quietly, as if he’s afraid of the answer, “Jonas, you love her?”

Jonas goes still. His heart thuds once, deep and certain.

“…Y–yes.”

Eliam nods slowly, not surprised, but absorbing it like a truth he had suspected and resisted in equal measure, “And… does she love you?”

A flush crawls up Jonas’s neck. His voice trembles with the edges of a smile he can’t quite contain.

“Yes,” He whispers, “S–she does.”

Eliam’s eyes flicker with something like the shock of recognition, as if witnessing his brother’s surety shakes something loose inside him. Jonas draws in a slow breath, steadying his courage. It comes easier than he expects.

“H–how about you… D–do you… l–l–love Lina?”

Eliam goes perfectly still. For a moment, Jonas thinks the question didn’t land. Then— far too quickly— Eliam barks a laugh.

“Oh— well. I mean,” He makes a vague little flourish with his hand, the kind he uses when trying to seem polished, “We’re married.”

Jonas’s stomach drops, hard and cold.

“That’s… n–not what I a–asked.”

The brittle smile falters. Eliam’s gaze slides away, shutters closing one by one until there’s nothing left but the faintest flicker of something exhausted. Another puzzle piece falls into place for Jonas. Suddenly everything makes more sense. Eliam’s fussing, his desperation to keep Jonas close, his insistence that Jonas follow the path laid out for him. Not just fear of becoming a father, not just fear of change, but the slow suffocation of a man trapped in a match he never chose. A man terrified his brother might taste a freedom he never had.

“Lina is a good woman,” He says carefully, like he’s reciting lines he practised on the walk here, “She’s dutiful. She’s patient with me. She deserves… a stable home. And children, soon.”

He doesn’t finish the rest. He doesn’t need to.

Jonas hears it anyway.

She deserves more than someone who only knows how to pretend.

“E–Eliam,” Jonas whispers, his throat tight, “I wa–want you t–to be… ha–happy, too.”

But Eliam snaps a smile back into place. This one is too thin, too bright, like a candle's last guttering flame.

"You don't worry about me," He says briskly, "I just needed to ensure you're truly all right. Now that I—"

Footsteps crunch softly through the wet grass, before stepping onto the stonework of the stables. Jonas recognises the rhythm instantly. That steady, grounded stride. Eliam stops mid-sentence. His eyes slide past Jonas's shoulder. Then widen. Then widens further.

Then somehow his eyes widen even more.

"Oh gods," He breathes.

Jonas turns.

Branwen is striding toward them, hair wind-tossed, sleeves rolled up, coat unfastened. She looks like she's walked straight out of a storm, all solid muscle and purpose and sharp-boned confidence. Her eyes are bright, brighter than usual, with something fierce and unsteady under the surface. Jonas knows she has news— *Good* news. Jonas has to look away quickly to hide his smile, relief replacing the dismay he felt moments ago.

But then he realizes she's now casually approaching the man who once accused her of stealing his brother's virtue.

Eliam makes a sound that is absolutely not dignified. Somewhere between a swallow and a squeak.

“Is she always— always— this *armed?”*

“She’s n–not armed.”

Jonas glances back at Branwen, noticing a hunting knife strapped at her belt.

“W–well. N–not very armed.”

Eliam pales.

Branwen reaches conversational distance. She nods at Jonas first, softening just a fraction, before tipping her chin up at Eliam with the driest, most unimpressed expression Jonas has ever seen her wear.

“You again,” She says, in a tone that could sand down wood.

“Marshal,” He blurts, bowing at an angle that looks both respectful and deeply terrified.

“You’re trespassing again,” She notes.

Eliam makes a strangled, injured sound, “A–again? I— no! I came through the proper— well— mostly proper— gates were confusing— guards everywhere— honestly I don’t know how any of you navigate this place without a map—”

Jonas can't help it; a tiny, strangled laugh escapes him. Branwen's eyes flick to him, warming.

Eliam looks between them, seeming to truly realize that they are absolutely together, and that this woman— this towering, lethal, incredible woman— is going to be his future sister-in-law. Eliam stiffens, tries to stand straighter, then deflates.

Now he looks like a dog expecting to be swatted.

Branwen's gaze flicks to Jonas. A question. A warning. A soft check-in.

Jonas gives a small, quick shake of his head.

"It's… f–fine. We're… We're g–good," He murmurs.

Branwen's jaw twitches once. But she nods.

Eliam clears his throat, visibly reaching for dignity that is nowhere around them.

"I, uh," He begins, voice cracking, "I wish to apologize. For… last time. When I said you were— that Jonas was— I was out of line, and I — I understand now that that was… wrong."

He grimaces, nervously wringing his fingers together.

Branwen raises an eyebrow, "You accused me of ruining your

brother's virtue."

Eliam lets out a tiny noise like a dying kettle, "Yes. I regret that."

"And of trapping him."

"Also regret that."

"And of compromising his future."

"Regret all of it," Eliam whispers, going a shade paler.

Branwen looks unimpressed for a long, silent moment. Then she nods once, "Good. Apology accepted, then."

Eliam sags with relief so strong he nearly lists sideways. Jonas tries not to smile, but Branwen sees it, the soft twist at the corner of his mouth, and her sternness cracks just a fraction. She glances at him again with a flicker of warmth.

She looks different. Not just proud, but grounded. Settled. Like something long-sought has finally slotted into place.

Jonas feels it before she speaks.

"E–everything go… w–well?" He asks quietly.

Branwen's eyes hold his. Then she reaches into her coat pocket, pulls out a folded parchment, and offers it to him, "I wrote a copy out for you."

Jonas's breath stumbles.

He unfolds it with careful fingers— recognizing immediately her handwriting— and reads the bold, clean script inside.

Branwen Rhydderch.

His chest goes tight and hot.

Eliam's head jerks, "Rhydderch?"

Branwen does not look away from Jonas.

"Yes," she says, voice quiet but certain, "It's done."

Jonas swallows hard. Pride floods him fast enough to make him dizzy. Eliam glances between them, utterly lost but perceptive enough to know something monumental just happened. He looks as though he wants to politely interrupt, perhaps to excuse himself, but doesn't know how.

Branwen, evidently sensing this, finally looks back at him.

"Come on," She says, "We'll walk you to the gate. You can visit again

when you have proper permissions."

Eliam blanches, "Oh—oh, that's— that's not necessary. Truly, I'm perfectly capable of—"

Branwen is already turning.

"It wasn't a suggestion."

Jonas feels laughter spark in his chest. He tries to swallow it. It escapes anyway in a soft, breathy sound he hasn't made in years. Eliam casts him a look of pure betrayal to which Jonas tries to compose his face but fails.

Branwen gestures sharply with her chin, "Move."

Eliam moves.

Jonas falls into step beside them. They cross the pasture, Branwen walking like someone who has spent her life carving paths through thick underbrush, decisive and surefooted. Eliam walks like someone expecting at any moment to be eaten.

"So," Eliam says after a strained silence, aiming for conversation and missing by miles, "You're… the Hunting Marshal."

Branwen gives him a side-eye so flat it's practically a blade, "You already know that."

“I— yes, but you… hunt?”

“Eliam,” Jonas says quietly, “Pl–please st–stop.”

Eliam shuts his mouth like he’s slamming a door. They walk a few more paces, though clearly trying to get on Branwen’s good side, Eliam attempts to keep a conversation going and tells her of how he was caught by the guards earlier.

Branwen exhales through her nose, “You must’ve scaled the outer rail before the guards caught you.”

Eliam startles, “I thought it was a decorative feature!”

“It has spikes.”

“Yes! Decorative spikes!”

Jonas nearly chokes on another laugh. He doesn’t dare look at Branwen because he knows she’ll smirk and he’ll lose what little composure he has left. She glances down at Jonas anyway, eyes softening the way they only do for him again, before focusing back on Eliam.

“You’re lucky they didn’t shoot you.”

Eliam looks at Jonas, as though he wishes desperately to rewind the

entire morning and enter through the proper gate like a normal human being. They reach one of the main gates, a tall iron thing still draped with last month's ivy wreaths. Branwen stops, hands resting on her belt. Eliam almost crashes into her before catching himself at the last second.

The guards take in Eliam with a very unimpressed stare. One nods to Branwen.

"This the intruder?"

Eliam lets out a wounded noise, "Intruder seems a very strong word —"

"He's leaving," Branwen says.

The guards exchange a knowing look and step aside.

Eliam exhales shakily. "Thank the gods," Though, then he clears his throat. Twice. "I just want to say… that despite— ah— our… earlier disagreements, I see now that Jonas— well— he's—"

He falters, looking helplessly to Jonas for rescue. Jonas only gives him an encouraging nod.

Eliam purses his lips, "He's himself," He says finally. "And he's… happy. And I know I was wrong about— about you. And him. And this place." His expression softens, shoulders lowering as if a long-carried weight has finally slipped, "So… gods help me… you have my blessing."

Jonas's eyes widen.

Branwen raises a brow, "...Do I?"

Eliam turns to Jonas, and adds quietly, "And she's good to you?"

Jonas nods, "She's v–very g–good to me."

Branwen looks away, ears going faintly pink.

Eliam's mouth wobbles, "Then… then I'm truly a fool."

"Yes," Branwen says instantly.

"Miss B–Branwen…" Jonas murmurs, mortified.

"What? He is."

Eliam lifts both hands in surrender, "Yes, yes. I'm a fool. Please keep all knives, axes, and improvised weapons where they are."

Branwen snorts. Jonas feels it in his ribs.

Eliam turns back to Branwen with earnest awkwardness, "I—I want to

make things right. Truly. And I'd like to visit again. Properly. To… meet you both, I suppose. To really get to know you. Without being tackled by guards."

Branwen gives him a long, assessive look.

"Of course," She says, "Remember to request permission first."

"Understood," Eliam says quickly. "Very understood. Painfully understood."

Jonas clears his throat softly. "A–and w–when the cottage is d–done… y–you can see it."

Eliam blinks, "Cottage?"

Jonas nods, shy warmth creeping into his face, "The Lady's g–giving us a place. An o–old b–barn. J–just enough for the t-two of us."

Eliam stares between them as though seeing a picture slowly coming into focus. "A cottage," He repeats, softer, "You'll have a *home*-home, not just a borrowed room in the house."

Jonas nods.

Something fragile and hopeful flares in Eliam's eyes, "Then yes. I'd really… like to visit."

Branwen sighs deeply, the kind that's half put-upon, half teasing, "Future in-laws. It never ends."

Eliam startles, "Future—?"

Jonas turns so red he's surprised his hair doesn't ignite.

Branwen just shrugs, "What, isn't him becoming my brother-in-law the current goal here?"

Jonas makes a strangled noise. Then he attempts to summon courage from some trembling place in his ribs, and says quietly, "I'd… l–like to visit you. At the inn. S–sometime."

Eliam's breath catches. Real joy breaks over his face.

"I'd like that," He says, "A lot."

Branwen lifts a brow, "I'll come too."

"Y–you don't h–have to—"

She hooks a finger through his belt loop and tugs him closer, eyes warm and steady, "I know. But I also know that you'd want me to."

Jonas flushes helplessly, "Y–yes."

“Then I’ll go,” She says simply.

Eliam watches them like someone quietly relieved that the world hasn’t closed its doors on him.

He reaches out, hesitates, then pulls Jonas into a tight, brief hug. “Write soon,” He murmurs, “Please write more often.”

Jonas’s voice is soft in his shoulder, “I w–will.”

When they part, Eliam straightens, bows— awkward and lopsided— to Branwen, then steps backward through the gate. He takes one last look at Jonas. Then he turns and hurries down the road, coat flapping behind him like a startled bird.

Branwen watches him go.

“He runs fast.”

“F-for… For someone n–nearly ar–arrested,” Jonas finishes.

They fall into easy silence. Jonas feels something swell in his chest— Relief, affection, and the quiet promise of something repaired instead of broken.

Branwen nudges his arm, “Your brother’s all right.”

Jonas smiles, soft and full, “Y–yes. A–and we’ll v–visit him one d–

day.”

Branwen hums. She shifts, turning toward him fully. The morning light catches the parchment still clenched in his hand.

Rhydderch.

Jonas’s breath trembles. She steps closer, her forehead touching his.

“Let’s go home,” She murmurs.

Jonas nods. They walk back together— hand brushing hand, the gate closing softly behind them— and for the first time, Jonas feels he can hold both his family and his future without fear of losing either.

Two days later, Branwen finishes scrubbing down the last wall plank just as the sun lifts high enough in the sky for the dust motes to glow like drifting embers. Jonas has somehow managed to sweep half the barn without stepping in his own swept piles, which she considers a small miracle. By the time they drag the old cot frame outside and prop open the crooked door to let some fresh air in, the interior almost looks like the suggestion of a home.

Not yet a cottage, but no longer only a barn. The roof needs patching. The windows are old enough that a strong sneeze might crack them. A swallow has built a nest in one of the rafters, which Jonas insists is a *“good omen,”* though she’s fairly sure he’s making it up because he likes birds.

But the beams are solid. The foundation is good. It's close enough to the kennels and stables that she can get there in under two minutes if something goes wrong, but far enough from the central yard that they'll have quiet.

Branwen stretches her back, feeling the tug of tired muscles and the faint sting along her forearms from where mirewolf claws had grazed her a week and a half earlier. Jonas makes a soft concerned noise when he sees her rubbing the spot, but she waves him off. He's fussed enough.

"Right," She says, surveying their work with a hand braced on her hip, "That's enough for today. Carpenters will be here tomorrow to start the interior walls."

"So… T–this is… re–really ours?"

"It will be," Branwen replies.

He lets out a low breath that fogs in the cool morning air. Then he glances sidelong at her, his mouth curving into a small smile, "A–awh. I was… l–liking the loft."

Branwen snorts, "You would."

"It's… c–cosy."

"It has a cot," She reminds him, "And a draft that tries to kill you every night."

His shoulders rise in a tiny shrug, “I d–don’t mind the d–draft.”

She turns to him fully, nudging his shoulder with her own, “You’re getting a proper bed here. A kitchen. A fireplace. A place to dry clothes instead of hanging them over a stall door. A washbasin that isn’t half frozen by morning. A laundry line.”

He flushes at that, *adorably,* which she refuses to admit aloud.

“And,” She adds, clearing her throat, “More than one room.”

Jonas brightens. Then blinks, “M–more than… one?”

“Yes,” She says, crossing her arms to hide the way her pulse flicks, “We’ll still have separate beds. Until we’re wed.”

His face goes a shade pinker, “R–right. Yes. O–of course.”

She looks back toward the barn’s interior, sunlight cutting through the gaps in the roof and scattering over dust and hay like little coins. It’s going to take work. Days of it. Weeks, even. But for the first time since she was sixteen, she feels something like a future settling into shape under her skin. A structure she can stand inside. A place she can hold onto.

Jonas steps closer beside her, shoulder brushing hers. “It’s… bi–bigger than I t–thought.”

“Mm.”

“A–and brighter.”

“Once we finish cleaning it,” She says, “It’ll be warmer too.”

He hums, quiet and pleased, then glances up at her with shy hope, “C–can… can the really b–birds stay…? In t–the ra–rafters?”

She exhales a soft laugh, “If they don’t dive-bomb me, fine.”

His face warms at that, and she feels the answering tug in her chest like someone’s hooking a thread through her ribs and pulling her closer without touching her at all.

“Come on. Not much else we can do for this until the carpenters come. Let’s head back to your cosy little loft.”

He nods eagerly, and happily falls in step with her. They’re about halfway back to the stables and kennels when Branwen hears Jonas repeat something under his breath for the third time in a row.

“R–Rhy… Rhydd…” Pause, “Rhyd… der… ch?”

She glances at him slowly. Jonas’s lips are pursed in intense concentration as he quietly repeats the name again.

“Rhydderch,” She corrects gently, dragging a hand down her face.

He grins— *too much, too cute,* “R–Rhyd… d–derch.”

“Close.”

He tries again, earnest and determined, “R– Rhydderch.”

“There it is,” She says, unable to stop the small smile tugging at her cheeks.

But Jonas doesn’t move on. Oh no. He repeats it again, softer, almost reverent. Then again, slightly faster. Then again, testing each consonant like it’s precious. Branwen feels her ears warm. She frowns at him— *tries* to frown at him— but it’s ruined by how ridiculously fond she feels.

“You like the name that much?”

Jonas freezes for a heartbeat, then blushes as if he’s been caught doing something scandalous, “I… I j–just… w–want to say it right.”

“You’ve said it right,” She says dryly, “You’ve said it right five times.”

He ducks his head, gaze dropping to grass, but his smile is unmistakable. Bright and shy and hopelessly sweet.

Branwen squints at him, brow arched, “You like it more than I do.”

Jonas’s head jerks up, “N–no! I mean— I d–do like it, but— n–not

more than— I just—" He flounders for several seconds, hands fluttering, cheeks burning, "It's… it's a g–good name."

"It can be a bit of a mouthful. I didn't really consider that part of it."

"It's… s-s-strong," He says softly, "A-and… a-and it sounds like y–you."

That stops her cold. She straightens slowly. Her breath lodges somewhere in her chest, "Now how in the hells does a last name sound like a person?"

Jonas shrugs, shoulders lifting in a small, sheepish motion, "It j–just… does."

Branwen tries to look unimpressed. Truly, she tries. But then Jonas whispers it again— *Rhydderch*— with this gentle, awed smile that makes something twist low in her stomach. She snaps her gaze away, pretending to examine a nearby tree that absolutely does not need examining.

"You're going to wear the name out before the cottage's roof is even patched."

"No," He says quietly, almost proud, "I w–want to… to g–get used to it."

Her heartbeat kicks up.

"You'll have time," She says, forcing her voice steady, "A long time."

Jonas pauses, swallowing. His eyes soften, full of a meaning he's too shy to say outright.

"I… I h–hope so."

"Right. Enough name chanting. Up the loft you go."

Jonas obeys instantly when they return to the stables and kennel, immediately moving toward the ladder, but Branwen doesn't move. She *should*— There's work waiting for her. A cracked saddle strap to mend, the feeding troughs to check before sunset, a mare that's been restless since dawn. Plenty of excuses to stay on the ground where her thoughts can't corner her so easily.

But her thoughts have teeth today.

Branwen Rhydderch.

The name still sits strange and heavy in her chest, feeling like both armour and an open wound. She keeps touching the inside of her coat as though the parchment with her copy is still there, as though she needs to confirm it's real each time her mind stutters over it. And the moment Jonas said it, all soft and hopeful, something in her cracked open in a way she can't seem to shut again.

The thought of the letter presses on her just as sharply. The blank sheet waiting in the loft like judgement. Like a debt.

She tells herself she's only going up to make sure Jonas doesn't fall off

the ladder or something equally as ridiculous. Or to remind him not to leave lanterns too close to the hay. Or to check that he hasn't reorganised the grooming brushes into some strange order again.

But her feet take her to the ladder anyway.

Not because she needs to. Because she wants to. Because the loft is warm, and quiet, and he'll be there— And she can think about her new name without feeling like the whole yard is listening.

She follows him up.

Jonas climbs the last rung and pulls himself into the loft. The space is warm with lantern light as sunlight still shines in the window. The tiny table in the corner is still a mess of brushes and harness polish, the remnants of his yesterday chores. His bedroll is neat. Hers downstairs is not.

Jonas goes to hang his cloak, then stops halfway, his eyes flickering toward something on the table she had set up for him, but now holds something for her.

The paper.

Branwen stiffens.

It's exactly where she left it: A single folded sheet, ink not yet used, pressed beneath the weight of a smooth little river stone she keeps for sharpening her skinning knife. Jonas doesn't touch it. He only looks at her, a question quiet in his eyes.

"Y-you d-don’t have to do it t-t-today," He says softly.

She exhales sharply through her nose, “I know.”

He doesn’t press. He never presses. He just moves around the loft quietly, lighting another lantern, shrugging off his boots, rolling his sleeves. She watches him, jaw tense. His calmness should soothe her. Instead, it now makes her feel a little exposed, like the room knows she’s stalling.

Eventually, Jonas steps up beside her, his presence steady and grounding.

"Y-you already did a l-l-lot this morning," He murmurs, "If y-you’re too tired—"

“I’m not tired,” She snaps, then winces, “Sorry.”

Jonas shakes his head lightly, "Y-you d-don’t need to be s-sorry."

But she feels like she does. A little. She’s fought mirewolves, storms, and nobles with agendas, and yet the thought of trying to write a letter to a sister she hasn’t seen in years freezes her right to the bone.

Jonas returns to the table and clears a little space. Then he glances back over his shoulder.

"D-d-do you w-want… t-tea?" He asks, "W-warm hands help with w-writing."

She grumbles something about tea not fixing anything but sits anyway. Jonas pours the tea from the small kettle they keep by a brazier Branwen may or may not have stolen from Maud. Her fingers curl around the cup automatically. Jonas sits across from her, careful, quiet, close enough that she can feel the warmth of him.

The blank paper waits between them.

Branwen taps her thumb along the rim of the cup, “It’s stupid.”

Jonas’s brows lift gently, “W–writing isn’t… isn’t s–stupid.”

“No, I mean—” She stops, raking a hand through her hair. “It’s been so long. I’ve nothing to say that wouldn’t sound… foolish. Or pathetic.”

Jonas’s voice is barely above a whisper, “It w–won’t sound li–like that.”

“It might,” She argues, “What am I supposed to write? *‘Hello, Hesta, it’s your sister who disappeared without a word. Sorry for letting grief turn me into a coward.’* That’ll warm her heart, I’m sure. I— Hells, she’s probably not even there anymore. I’m not writing a letter to her. I’m writing a letter to someone asking if they know about a Freeholder who might have been there over fifteen years ago.”

Jonas looks at her for a long, steady moment.

She sometimes hates how patient he is with her. Hates it because it lands too cleanly, cuts through the armour she's kept welded around this part of her life. He studies her like he's sorting through a tangled piece of tack, careful not to pull the knots tighter.

Then, softly, "Y–you're not as–asking for the past b–back. You're just… just o–opening a door. A s–small one," He pauses, "Th–th–that's all a letter is."

Branwen draws in a slow breath. The cool air stings on the way in, like she's preparing for the plunge.

"I don't know how to start," She admits.

"Y–you… you could st–start with her n–name."

Branwen glares weakly at him, "Very helpful."

He smiles a little, not one of his shy smiles, but the warm, sure smile he's started giving her more often since the night they kissed. "You c–could start with… wh–whoever you're w–writing *to*," He suggests, "Th–the person still there. M–Matron Esset, wasn't it? The o–o–one who might re–remember her."

"Simple," She says dejectedly.

Except it isn't. Not really. Llyncraig might have changed hands twice since Hesta was there, because surely she… simply isn't there anymore. People leave. Over fifteen years is enough time for a whole

town to forget a name, never mind a girl with mud on her boots, from some forgotten Freehold village. Gods, this Matron Esset might also be dead. All leads and connections, gone.

Hesta might be three provinces away, married, dead, anything. Branwen's letter is essentially a note pinned to the wind, hoping it catches in the right branches.

She looks down at the page. The ink pot. The quill pen.

She hasn't written a letter in over a decade. Directions for deliveries, yes. Inventory lists. Patrol reports for the Lady's archives. But a letter, a personal one, is another beast entirely.

Jonas eases the quill toward her. Branwen picks it up like it might bite.

He doesn't look away, "You're… y–you're not doing it a–alone. I'm right h–here."

She swallows. Her heartbeat pulses at the base of her throat, but she nods once and lowers the quill. Ink pools on the nib, then her hand hesitates over the paper.

Jonas whispers, "Y–you've fought wo–worse things than p–paper."

She shoots him a look. He has the audacity to look innocent.

Branwen sets her jaw, steadies her grip, and presses the quill to the

page.

The first stroke is crooked. The second is too light.

She can feel Jonas smiling gently as she mutters curses under her breath and adjusts her posture, shoulders bunching.

Finally, she writes it:

To Matron Esset,

I write in hope you may still hold record of those who lived or worked with you…

Jonas leans forward slightly when she pauses from writing, “It’s g–g–good.”

She exhales long and slow. Then she writes another line.

Hesta worked under you as an apprentice bookkeeper. She would have been seventeen when I last saw her— quick-handed, stubborn, always double-checking columns even when she’d done them right the first time. I hope you remember her.

“I–it’s honest.”

She nods, jaw trembling as she lowers the quill again.

I am trying to find her. If you know where she went if she left Llyncraig, or who she travelled with, I would be grateful for any direction. And if she was not alone when she left— if she left word of our middle sister, Meinwen— I ask to be told that as well.

Her throat burns as she writes it.

Jonas goes still. She can feel him feeling the weight of those words, the echo of their old conversation in the stables, the night he quietly insisted she wasn't as alone as she believed. His quiet breath steadies, then softens. A comforting presence.

She adds a final line, hand tight enough on the quill that her knuckles ache.

I do not ask for them to write back. Only that this letter reach someone who remembers.

Branwen finally puts the quill down and sits back, shoulders sagging as though she's fought a battle.

"It's a g–g–good letter."

"It's barely anything," She mutters.

"It's a b–beginning," He says softly, "Th–that matters."

Branwen rubs her face with both palms, “I feel ridiculous.”

“You sh–shouldn’t.”

“I do.”

“F–Fine… I’ll a–allow it, f–for now,” He smiles gently.

She huffs. Jonas shifts closer, his knee brushing hers. She doesn’t move away.

“Y–you can write an–another to–tomorrow,” He says, “Or n–next week… Or wh–when you’re ready.”

She nods slowly.

He picks up the letter and folds it carefully, like it’s something fragile. When he places it inside a small envelope, he seals it with a wax stamp he borrowed from Maud. The comically ornate rose emblem makes her groan.

Jonas fights a smile, “The p–postmaster won’t c-c–care.”

“She’ll laugh.”

“She w–won’t.”

“She will,” She insists.

Jonas reaches out and takes her wrist, gently and earnestly, “M–Miss Branwen Rh–Rhydderch. You w–wrote a letter to find y–y–your family… Th–that’s something to be p–proud of.”

Her chest tightens. She swallows around it. He squeezes her wrist once more, then lets go, giving her space. Branwen leans back in the chair and stares at the envelope on the table. The air feels too tight for a moment, the kind of tightness that comes before relief, not pain.

After a long silence, she murmurs, “What if no one answers?”

Jonas’s expression softens in that devastatingly gentle way that always unrattles her.

“Th–then you’ll know y–you tried… B–but I think s–someone will. If n–not Matron Esset… Ma–maybe a family member who k–knew Hesta.”

Branwen looks at him. He holds her gaze without flinching. Quiet confidence. Warm faith. The same faith that told her the land would remember her name.

“I guess the world might be small enough,” She mutters, “I’ll send it tomorrow.”

Jonas beams, his eyes bright and soft, a quiet pride and relief spreading across his features. The corners of his mouth lift in that shy, earnest smile that makes his whole face seem to glow, and the faintest crinkle appears at the bridge of his nose, the kind of expression that

makes it impossible not to feel seen.

She frowns at him instinctively, “Stop that.”

“St–stop what?”

“That face.”

“I’m n–not—”

“That face,” She insists.

He bites his lip, failing spectacularly at hiding the smile. She groans and shoves his shoulder lightly. He sways, laughing under his breath. The loft warms. The envelope sits on the table like a tiny sun burning a hole through her ribs.

Jonas’ voice drifts softly through the loft.

“Miss Br–Branwen?”

“Hm?”

“I’m… p–proud of you.”

She looks up at the ceiling, because her throat’s too tight to answer.

But after a long moment, she says, “Thank you.”

A beat. Then, very quietly, “R… R–Rhydderch.”

She groans, “Don’t make me regret picking that as my name.”

Jonas laughs softly. And Branwen, staring into the rafters of the loft, clutching the faint ache in her chest, realizes the cottage won’t just be a place to live.

It’ll be a place to come back to.

A place to write from.

A place her sisters might one day knock at the door of, if the world is, in fact, small enough.

She closes her eyes.

Tomorrow she’ll send the letter.

And right now, she lets herself believe in it.

Six months later.

The frost clings stubbornly to the edges of the lane, coating the grass in a brittle lace that glitters beneath the pale wash of dawn. Jonas's breath drifts ahead of him in soft, quick clouds as he walks the now-familiar path toward the kennels, carrying a small crate of supplies tucked to his chest.

He walks the way he always does, light-footed and measured, but not because of fear anymore. Habit, yes. Training, yes. But his shoulders stay looser now, his chin higher, his rhythm certain. This is not the *Quiet March* of a servant trying to stay invisible. It's simply Jonas moving through a morning he knows by heart.

He passes the hedgerows that curve like green ribs around the central yard. Beyond them, the valley rolls out in soft, mist-touched waves. The estate is waking slowly: the servants of the scullery lighting the first fires, someone in the kitchen garden checking on the vegetables, a distant laugh of two stablehands who've started their day early. Jonas has always been one of those early risers. He doesn't need to be anymore— his hours have changed since he and Branwen formally announced their courtship— but the mornings are his favourite part of the day. He likes the quiet. He likes the stillness.

He likes walking back to a little cottage that only months ago was a half-ruined barn.

He rounds the last bend in the lane. The kennels come into view, their stone walls softened by moss and morning light. The horses shuffle in their stalls. The hounds stir with low, throaty murmurs. Somewhere inside, Branwen's voice carries over the sound of hooves and straw.

Jonas pauses.

Every time, without fail, that voice makes something warm and steady settle in his chest.

He steps inside the doorway, no hesitation at the shadowed beam now. Once, he would have stopped, whispered a rhyme against unseen things that might latch onto him. He still respects the old lore, still keeps salt above their hearth, but the fear doesn't grip him the way it used to.

Maybe because, if anything tried to follow him home now, it would have to answer to Branwen Rhydderch.

He bites down a smile and slips past the threshold.

The air is warm, smelling of hay, woodsmoke, and hound musk. Branwen stands near the far stall, sleeves pushed up, her braid half unravelled, her wrist braced against the flank of a bay mare who is either very patient or very fond of her. Two stablehands stand nearby — Brenna and young Esther— watching her with expressions that hover somewhere between concentration and fondness.

And Branwen— gods help her— is actually chatting. *Casually.*

Not lecturing. Not barking orders. Talking.

Brenna says something that makes Branwen snort, and Esther laughs too loudly, elbowing Brenna as if she can't quite believe the Marshal found something funny. Branwen sees Jonas before the others do. Her posture shifts, not softening exactly, but changing in a way Jonas has learned to recognize: the tightening of her shoulders, the flicker in her gaze that warms like banked coals catching.

He still blushes every time it happens.

“Morning,” She calls to him, as though the two of them didn’t wake up in the same cottage together.

Her tone is gruff, steady. But her eyes linger just a heartbeat longer than they should.

Esther turns and waves. “Jonas! You’re just in time. Marshal’s teaching us how to read the mare’s tail. We were all wrong.”

Branwen huffs. *“You* were wrong. So was Brenna.”

“Oh, come on,” Brenna protests, swatting Branwen’s arm lightly, “You said I was the least wrong—”

“That doesn’t mean you were right,” Branwen says flatly.

Jonas snorts under his breath.

If someone told him a year ago he’d see Branwen bantering with stablehands— joking, even— he would’ve thought they were lying. But here they are: Branwen deadpanning, Brenna nudging her like a sister teasing, Esther grinning like she’s been accepted into some secret club. It took time. It took trust. It took Branwen realizing these people weren’t looking to her for perfection, just steadiness. She’s still brusque, still intimidating, still the Marshal who once killed a mirewolf in a storm— but she’s no longer an island on the edge of the estate.

She has people now, aside from Jonas. A small circle, but a real one.

It makes something unclench in Jonas's chest, every time he sees it.

He steps closer, adjusting the crate in his arms, "B-B-Brenna misplaced the w-w-worming powder again," He tells Branwen, "S-so Esther asked m–me to bring more."

Branwen side-eyes Brenna, who shrugs, "This one misplaces everything that isn't nailed down." But her attention flicks to Jonas's hands, then to his wrists, "Speaking of which."

His wrist. Jonas glances down.

The red twine is still there, faintly frayed at the edges but intact. He twists his wrist slightly, letting it catch the light, "St–still hasn't c–come undone."

Branwen's mouth curves into something small but genuine, "Mm. Then you fair folk must be keeping watch."

Brenna glances between them, eyebrows raised. Esther smothers a grin.

Branwen clears her throat sharply, "That's enough gawking. Off with you two. Feed the pups before they eat through the gate."

They scamper off with muffled laughter. Jonas pretends he doesn't hear Branwen mutter something murderous but not entirely unamused.

When the others have gone, Branwen steps closer, nudging Jonas's shoulder with her own. "You don't have to wake up so early now, you know."

"B-but y-you're already w-working. I-I'd feel b-bad if I w-was still a-asleep in the c-cottage."

"Well, I don't sleep much to begin with."

He nods. They don't need to elaborate. The wolves still prowl the far woods. The old wounds still ache in rain. Branwen's nightmares fade more quickly now, but they haven't vanished entirely. She's better at waking him gently than she was at first. He's better at holding her until the shaking stops.

"Cottage to your liking?" She asks.

He brightens immediately, "It's w-w-warm now. And th-the h-hearth draws pr-properly."

"And the roof?"

"N-no l-leaks since y-you fixed the fl-flashing."

"And the birds?"

Jonas smiles— Wider this time, "Th-they’re w-w-wonderful. I-I th-think th-they’re going to h-have b-babies soon."

Branwen groans, “Of course.”

They head out of the kennels together. The morning has bloomed into full daylight now, frost melting into thin lines along the path. The estate is stirring— voices, cart wheels, the clatter of metal pails— but the space between Branwen and Jonas stays quiet and easy.

Jonas walks beside her without glancing at shadows or lowering his head. He walks beside her like a man who knows where he belongs.

They turn toward the servants’ hall, passing the little shed where extra tack is stored, then the outdoor clotheslines fluttering with aprons and tunics. On the far side of the yard, several of the newer servants wave to Jonas— Real friends, people he sometimes invites to the cottage for dinner, who tease him gently instead of pitying him.

He waves back, cheeks warm.

Branwen gives him a sideways look, pretending not to be proud, “You’re popular.”

“I–I am n–not.”

“You are. And you’re not trembling around everyone anymore.”

"I-I n-never tr-trembled around e-everyone."

Branwen gives him a *‘don’t lie to me, boy’* look.

He clears his throat, “Not… as m–much.”

She snorts.

They reach the covered alcove where the servants collect their mail. The Lady had a cubby installed just for Branwen after the name officialisation, *Hunting Marshal Rhydderch* carved in clean, sturdy letters across the front.

Jonas catches her looking at it sometimes when she thinks no one notices.

Today, he reaches up and pulls the latch.

A few notices for Jonas— work rosters, a letter from Eliam, a polite invitation from Brenna to a mid-week supper in the staff hall, a folded scrap from Maud reminding him he still hasn’t returned her ladle.

And then—

Branwen goes still beside him.

There is a letter.

Addressed in an unfamiliar hand.

To: *Branwen Rhydderch*

And beneath it:

Hunting Marshal of the Amaranthe Estate, Eastern Dominion

Return stamp: *Matron Esset of Llyncraig.*

The world narrows to the size of the envelope.

Jonas hears Branwen's breath hitch. Barely. A small, broken inhale she tries to swallow down. He turns to her slowly. Her face is unreadable, her expression locked tight, eyes trained on the letter like it's something alive. Her fingers flex at her sides but do not reach for it.

Jonas lifts it gently from the cubby and holds it out.

Branwen stares.

Not touching it. Not moving.

He waits.

After a long moment, she takes it.

Her hand shakes. Not much, but enough.

"…It could be… anyone," She mutters, voice low and brittle, "Six months is a long time. Maybe a neighbour sent a reply. Or an old clerk. Someone clearing out old records. Could be a mistake."

Jonas shakes his head gently, "It… it s–says Matron Es–Esset's n–name."

Branwen's jaw tightens, "Could still be someone writing on her behalf. Or someone who found the letter and didn't know what to do with it." Her breath hitches again, a small and frightened sound, "Gods. It might not be anything at all."

Jonas studies her quietly. Her shoulders are rigid, braced like she's preparing for an impact she can't see yet. She turns the envelope over once, twice, almost hoping to find proof it isn't real. That she hasn't been hoping for something she has no right to expect.

"It's r–real," Jonas says softly.

She doesn't answer.

"An–and it… it came b–back to y–you."

Branwen's throat works around a hard swallow. She doesn't look convinced. Not yet. Not enough to let herself believe it. But she

doesn't let go of the envelope either. Her thumb stays pressed to the seal like she's afraid it will fly away if she loosens her grip.

After a long, trembling breath, she whispers something barely audible.

"…Six months."

Jonas nods, "S–sometimes… letters ta–take the long w–way home."

She swallows again, steadier this time, "I'll open it at home."

He nods.

Branwen tucks the letter carefully inside her coat, as if afraid the wind might snatch it away.

They leave the alcove together, slow and quiet, walking down the lane toward their cottage. Frost crunches underfoot. Far off, a hound barks twice before settling. The world keeps moving— carts trundling, kitchen bells ringing, morning unfolding— but around them, a stillness holds.

Halfway down the path, Jonas slips his hand into hers.

Branwen squeezes back.

Neither speaks. The anticipation is too big for words, the hope too fragile to prod at yet.

The cottage comes into view. Smoke rises from its new chimney, their laundry flapping on the line, the swallow's nest still tucked in the rafters. The roof gleams where Branwen patched it. The little herb garden Jonas planted is rimed with frost, but alive.

A home. Theirs.

Branwen stops just short of the door, looking at it like she can't quite believe it's real. Jonas looks at her— the strongest woman he has ever known, the bravest, the kindest— and sees something new behind her eyes.

Not fear. Not grief. Not rootlessness. Instead, something like belonging.

He squeezes her hand again, "Wh–whenever you're r–ready."

Branwen nods once. She reaches for the door and Jonas steps inside with her. Behind them, the valley exhales into morning.

In here, the hearth crackles to life. The air warms. The cottage hums softly with the scent of their shared days, hay and soap and Branwen's coat hanging near the wall, and Jonas's tea steeping in its tin. Some of their things are packed— They'll be heading out to visit Eliam soon.

The letter rests between them on the table, unopened but full of possibility.

Branwen sets her hand atop it.

Jonas covers her hand with his.

The world keeps on outside.

Inside, they have the quiet.

And each other.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand that's a wrap! Well, mostly. There'll be some extra side stories. I want to write something for The Lady (specifically about her past, and exploring more worldbuilding for the noble side of things) and Eliam. Branwen and Jonas will need to get a smut scene lol. And also, I just wanna do another chapter like Interlude: Inches Closer AKA cute lil vignettes here and there, especially when they're married. Sooo... If you have any ideas you want to see written out for their married life, let me know. Nothing to do with kids though. Branwen and Jonas won't have children.

None of that will come any time soon, as I'll probably take a bit of a break and try to catch up on my reading since writing has made me neglect my TBR and goodreads haha.

But yeah, thanks for reading! I always find myself struggling with endings... It's why I haven't touched my Borgakh/Laurent story in a while. A part of me wants to delete it and retry the whole orc/human prince story but another part of me feels like I owe it to... someone to finish it. Maybe one day. Though honestly, the next big writing project I wanna tackle is a male slave/female master narrative because I've been too dang soft lately. I wanna be Mean and Cruel. >:) Also, I wanna try my hand at lesbian femdom, too.

Thanks again for reading. I don't really answer comments anymore but I do read all of them and they're one of my main

motivations to keep going with this niche I got. If I didn't receive such kind words I would have stopped writing a long time ago.

Anyway let me plug in my ko-fi again: https://ko-fi.com/sanguia

Chapter 16: Side Story: The Lady (Part 1)

Chapter Summary

> And now, for something completely different. Takes place ~40 years before the main story.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The river fog clings low to the hills the morning Mirelda turns twenty-two, trailing over the Amaranthe estate like a silk hem drawn across the earth. The water-meadows glisten beneath it, dewy and silvered, and the orchards beyond appear half-formed, floating in a pale haze. The house, vast and pale-stoned, rises above it all like a ship breasting a soft white tide. The first bell has not yet rung. The servants have not yet stirred in earnest. And still, the day has already begun for her.

It begins, as it always does, with scripture.

Her private tutor, Priestess Vaele, sits near the fire in Mirelda's sitting room, clad in ceremonial dusk-grey. Her hands, elegant and ringless, rest atop a folio embossed with the sigil of Alira's temples: A stylized foot pressed to a bowed head. The morning's lesson is open to the Canticles of Harmony, though Mirelda could recite them without glancing once. She learned these words before she learned her letters.

Vaele's voice flows evenly, the same steady cadence she has used since Mirelda was twelve, *"'And Alira stepped upon the tumult of her consort, and in that stillness made the world safe for order. For lineage. For daughters untold.'"*

Mirelda keeps her posture straight on the cushioned bench, her brow smooth and her breath quiet. She does not fidget, or shift her weight,

or allow irritation to colour her expression. She has been raised to inherit. The estate. The mills. The landholdings in the copper valleys. The political obligations that accompany a name like Amaranthe. She will not betray distraction over a passage she could quote backwards if needed.

Vaele closes the folio with a soft clap of vellum.

“And what does the First Binding teach you, child?”

Mirelda knows what Vaele expects— has always expected— but she considers the question carefully. Not the myth itself; that part is fixed. But the answer’s tactical weight.

“That order is a choice,” Mirelda says finally, “A discipline. Not a default. Alira’s strength is not just her power but her restraint.”

Vaele inclines her head, a small gesture of approval, “And her consort?”

Mirelda lowers her gaze, the motion practised but never meek.

“That he serves willingly now, because obedience is the only correct expression of gratitude. Dominion exists through proper hierarchy.”

“Very good.”

The fire snaps softly. Outside, the fog begins to break, revealing the shape of the stables and the line of carriage roads leading toward the

orchards. Early riders will be out soon. Her mother used to take her hawking at this hour, when the valley winds rose and the sky was pale as bone. Mirelda sometimes misses that— Those rare mornings when duty and affection braided together in a way that felt simple. But her mother died when she was seventeen, and simplicity is no longer a luxury she can afford.

A knock breaks the quiet, “Enter,” Vaele calls.

The door opens to reveal one of the elder maids. She curtseys in the deep, sweeping way expected of servants in a house with this much lineage to defend.

“Forgive the interruption, Priestess. My lady…” The maid glances toward Mirelda, “Your aunt requests your presence in the west parlour.”

Mirelda nods, “Thank you. I’ll attend her at once.”

Vaele dismisses her with a blessing murmured under her breath, a streak of ritualistic ash drawn lightly across Mirelda’s wrist. A reminder of lineage. Of duty. Of the day to come.

She strides through the estate with unhurried steps. The east wing of the Amaranthe house is a gallery of ancestral ambition.

Mirelda walks beneath oil portraits of stern-faced women in naval regalia, in court robes, in magistrate’s collars, in expeditionary coats embroidered with gold thread that once signified governance over distant colonial enclaves. One ancestor, Lady Haranne Amaranthe, stares out from her portrait with a predator’s focus. She led the negotiations that annexed the Indigo Coast. Another, Lady Selmaria, oversaw five mills and rewrote inheritance law to her advantage.

Another funded the earliest Dominion voyages across the Shifting Sea.

Mirelda has walked this corridor thousands of times. She still feels it each time: The weight of legacy bearing down like a hand on the back of her neck.

She enters the east parlour to find her aunt, Lady Celith Amaranthe, looking over a stack of correspondence. Celith is not the heir, but she has served as de facto matriarch since Mirelda's mother's death. Her hair is bound in a crown braid threaded with grey ribbon, her posture impeccable even at rest.

"Come sit," Celith says, though it is phrased more as a direction than invitation.

Mirelda takes the seat opposite her.

Celith slides one of the letters forward with two fingertips, "The capital writes often this season. It seems the Magistracy is finally proceeding with the frontier charter for our northern holdings."

Mirelda allows a small nod, "Good. The logging routes need formal recognition. It'll help with labour disputes."

"Quite," Celith's tone is unreadable, as always, "And there's other news. The Outer Council met two weeks ago regarding succession protocols for noble estates that cross colonial lines. This will affect your position once you inherit. You'll need to prepare for hearings."

The Amaranthe estate's wealth draws from three major sectors: The textile mills, the orchards, and, more recently, shipping investments

tied to the colonies. The council debates can sway profits for decades. Mirelda knows this. She has studied ledgers since she was old enough to hold a quill without smudging ink.

“I’ll begin reviewing legislation this evening,” Mirelda says.

“You’ll begin after the meeting.”

Mirelda lifts an eyebrow, “What meeting?”

Celith watches her a moment before answering, “With the Avenleigh family.”

The name is unfamiliar enough to draw a fractional pause from Mirelda. She keeps her posture composed, hands folded neatly in her lap, but her heartbeat shifts subtly against her ribs, as if something unseen has adjusted its grip.

“Avenleigh?”

“A respectable old house,” Celith says. Her voice is even, precise, the same tone she uses when enumerating taxes or border levies, “Less powerful than ours, which makes them more flexible. More grateful,” Her fingers tap once on the folded letter resting atop the writing desk. “They have a son. Quiet, scholarly, well-tempered. Suitable.”

Ah.

The fog in Mirelda’s mind clears, not with surprise but with

inevitability. This is not a treaty negotiation. Not a colonial appointment. Not another inheritance audit or reassignment of tenants.

This is personal calculus.

A marriage.

Celith sees the understanding settle and inclines her head by a fraction, “You are of age. And the estate requires its next generation secured. You will meet him today. His name is Rhalin.”

The air in the solar stills, as though the room itself has entered a ritual pause. Outside, the Amaranthe estate continues its quiet, relentless order: gravel crunching beneath measured footsteps, servants moving along hedged paths, the distant lowing of cattle. Inside, the future turns on a single sentence.

Mirelda is no stranger to expectation. She has been shaped by it since childhood, honed by tutors and stewards and Celith’s own unyielding oversight. She does not protest. She has always known this moment would come.

Still, she asks, calmly, “Is this my decision?”

Celith does not smile. Celith never smiles unless there is advantage in it.

“This house’s future is your decision,” She says, “The match is merely the first step.”

Mirelda sits with that. The phrasing is deliberate. *You are duty, not desire.*

She nods once, “When?”

“They arrive within the hour.”

And within that hour, Mirelda allows herself the smallest indulgence: Curiosity.

Avenleigh.

She had not encountered the name often in her studies, which in itself is revealing. Truly powerful houses are unavoidable; they imprint themselves on ledgers, laws, wars. Lesser houses drift at the edges of influence, attached to institutions rather than land or armies.

The Avenleighs, she recalls now, are one of those.

Their matriarch, Lady Avenleigh, holds the title of Royal Games Architect. Designing riddles, ceremonial trials, and elaborate strategy games meant to shape the minds of noble children and officers-in-training. Games used in academies and war colleges, in Covenant Day pageantry and succession rites. Intellectual theatre, some called it. Harmless amusement with delusions of grandeur.

Others understood better.

Mirelda had once seen one of Lady Avenleigh's designs at a provincial exhibition: A vast rotating board of lacquered wood, painted in Dominion colours, studded with tiny carved cannons and flags. Participants moved tokens representing regiments, supply caravans, and *"civilian morale,"* responding to scripted events drawn from sealed envelopes. Floods. Rebellions. Illness. A brilliant, bloodless simulation of control.

It was not wizardry. Nor circus work.

It was pedagogy.

And pedagogy, in the Eastern Dominions, was power's quieter twin.

The Royal Games were not meant to win wars. They were meant to teach obedience, hierarchy, and the illusion of choice. Officers learned that victory came from anticipating scarcity, not questioning command. Noble daughters learned that strategy could be aesthetic, ceremonial, even playful— So long as it always ended in Dominion order.

The Avenleighs did not rule land. They shaped minds.

Which explained both their survival and their weakness.

They had sons. Only sons.

No daughters to inherit the house outright. No matriarchs to seat themselves permanently in the Assembly. Their influence depended entirely on continued favour, on proximity to the Crown, on being useful without being threatening.

And now, they were offering one of those sons. Mirelda understands the calculus with cool clarity.

House Amaranthe is old. Old enough that its power no longer needs embellishment. Its lands are vast, its revenues stable, its bloodline unquestioned. What it requires now is continuity, not expansion.

A husband, then, must meet very specific criteria.

He must not bring competing claims. He must not bring dangerous ambition. An Avenleigh son fits all of these needs precisely.

By marrying into Amaranthe, he escapes the quiet suffocation of his natal house, where sons accumulate like surplus inventory. In return, Amaranthe absorbs his name, his loyalty, and whatever minor prestige still clings to his family's royal appointments.

Someone who would be flexible and grateful.

Suitable.

Mirelda fastens the last clasp at her throat and studies her reflection. There is nothing bridal about her attire. She wears deep green wool, tailored sharply at the shoulders, with the Amaranthe sigil picked out in muted gold thread. Her hair, naturally glossy black with faint blue sheen, is braided into a coronet pattern echoing her family's crest.

She wonders, briefly, what kind of man this Rhalin Avenleigh is.

“Quiet,” Celith said. *“Scholarly.”*

Those are not traits celebrated in men, but they are tolerated—sometimes even prized— when paired with obedience. A man who reads, who embroiders, who hosts with grace and speaks only when invited can be shaped into an asset rather than a liability.

And if he cannot?

Then he will still be contained.

That, too, is part of suitability.

When the Avenleigh carriage arrives, it does so without fanfare.

No heralds. No banners. Just polished wood, modest gilding, and a driver who dismounts quickly, head bowed and efficient. Celith watches from the steps, assessing before greeting, as always.

Lady Avenleigh emerges first.

She is smaller than Mirelda expected, sharp-eyed and precise, with the unmistakable bearing of someone accustomed to being underestimated. Her hair is streaked with silver, her dress severe but impeccably cut. This is a woman who survives not through force, but through relevance.

Behind her comes her son.

Rhalin Avenleigh. She observes him carefully. This is, after all, her future husband.

He steps down carefully from the carriage, not with the stiffness of fear but with the attentiveness of someone accustomed to measuring his movements. As though mindful of his own weight. As though the ground itself might take offence if he misjudges it.

He is neatly dressed in travelling blacks and deep blue, well-cut but deliberately plain, the sort of clothing chosen to offend no one. He is pale, though not sickly, the sort of pallor that speaks of indoor labour and controlled hours rather than fragility. His dark hair is kept shorter than current fashion, trimmed close at the nape and combed back with careful precision. No loose strands escape to soften the line of his face, which is narrow, fine-boned, and with a straight nose. The lips are neither thin nor full, but held as though he has learned not to let them part without permission. His eyes, when they lift briefly, are a muted grey-blue.

There is something unfinished about his youth. The angles of his cheekbones are still sharp, the hollows beneath them not yet softened by age or comfort. His hands are already clasped behind his back, fingers interlaced. He holds himself as one holds an object entrusted to another's care: Upright, present, and waiting to be placed.

Mirelda watches him take in the sweep of the drive, the clipped hedges, the symmetry of the gardens, the scale of the house rising beyond. He is reading the place, measuring where he stands within it. Almost immediately, his eyes lower again, respectful and controlled, settling somewhere between his mother's shoulder and the ground.

He is… unassuming.

Simply present in a way that does not demand attention or challenge it. A man shaped to fit himself into other people's lives rather than impose his own shape upon them.

Another figure follows him down from the carriage a heartbeat later.

The attendant is younger, dressed in the muted livery of House Avenleigh, his boots scuffed from travel. He moves with more ease, less calculation, though his head lowers all the same when Lady Avenleigh clears her throat. He carries Rhalin's satchel, held carefully under one arm.

Mirelda registers him only in passing. An attendant is an attendant. Every son of a decent house arrives with one.

Her attention returns, unprompted, to Rhalin.

She notes, without quite knowing why, the details that betray him. His eyes linger a moment longer on the embroidered banners hanging beneath the portico than on the stonework itself, tracing thread and motif rather than architecture. When Lady Avenleigh speaks to a servant, he inclines his head a fraction too deeply, spine bending in a way that suggests habit rather than performance.

His mouth presses thin as he listens, as if holding words back by force of will. His shoulders remain squared, but there is a softness to the line of them, a restraint that feels deliberate. This is a man who has learned that stillness is safety.

A son shaped for survival. Mirelda does not yet know what, precisely, he has survived. But she recognizes the craftsmanship of it when she sees it.

Celith steps forward to greet them, all gracious precision, and Mirelda follows at her shoulder. Introductions are made, titles exchanged, pleasantries observed. Rhalin bows to Mirelda, properly, his voice soft but steady as he offers the scripted words of courtesy with the deference expected of men.

“Lady Mirelda Amaranthe. I am honoured to be received.”

She inclines her head in return, “Welcome to Amaranthe.”

Their eyes meet for a moment.

There is no spark. No tension. No flutter of anticipation.

Only assessment. And perhaps— just perhaps— something quieter beneath his composure. A carefulness that feels less like fear, and more like concealment.

Mirelda files the impression away without comment.

Suitability, she knows, often hides its most important truths in what is not said.

And she has been trained, all her life, to notice what others overlook.

They are given the east parlour.

It is not a concession so much as a courtesy, a room with tall windows opening onto the lower gardens, far enough from the main hall that voices do not carry easily. Celith and Lady Avenleigh withdraw together with a murmur of formalities, already sinking into the dense, bloodless work of contracts and lineage clauses. Ink before sentiment. Always.

The door closes.

For a moment, Mirelda and Rhalin stand facing one another with nothing but the hush of the estate between them. The quiet here is different from the charged stillness of ceremony. Ticking clock, distant birds, the faint scent of cut grass and polish.

Rhalin shifts first. He does not pace. He does not fidget. He simply adjusts his grip on the small leather folio tucked under his arm, knuckles whitening briefly before easing.

Mirelda watches him with the same attentive neutrality she would give a new steward or officer. He is younger than her. That much is obvious, not in his height or build, but in the careful way he holds himself, as though bracing for correction that may or may not come. In the Eastern Dominions, most boys are already married by seventeen or sixteen, folded neatly into their wives' households before they have learned to imagine alternatives. That he is a tad older than the typical age speaks more to Avenleigh caution than any failing of his own.

"You may sit," She says, gesturing to the settee by the window.

He does so at once, perching rather than reclining, hands folded again in his lap. His posture is impeccable. Too impeccable, as though he has rehearsed this moment. Mirelda takes the chair opposite him, crossing one leg over the other. She does not soften herself. Kindness, in her experience, is clearer when it is honest.

“You know why you are here,” She says simply.

“Yes, my lady,” He hesitates, then corrects himself quickly, “Lady Mirelda.”

She allows the correction without comment, “You understand that this courtship is not a test of affection.”

“Yes.”

“And that marriage into House Amaranthe is not ornamental.”

Another nod. His gaze remains lowered, “I understand.”

“Good,” She leans back slightly, “Then I will be plain with you.”

He looks up at that. There is relief there, faint but unmistakable.

“My family is powerful,” Mirelda continues, “Not because we are beloved, but because we are orderly. We do not tolerate disorder within our walls. A husband of this house is expected to be discreet,

loyal, and useful. He hosts. He manages domestic matters. He presents harmony to the public eye. He produces heirs."

She lets the last word land.

Rhalin's throat works. His answer comes a breath later, "Yes."

She studies him a moment longer before speaking again, her gaze steady.

"This does not mean you will be unmade. On the contrary. A good husband is valued. Protected. Given space to excel where appropriate."

The words are measured. Still, she sees the effect immediately. His shoulders ease by a fraction, tension draining from them in a way he does not seem entirely aware of. He inhales, then exhales more fully than he has since entering the room, as if some unspoken fear has loosened its grip.

"I… I enjoy domestic work," He says at last. Carefully. The cadence of the sentence is wrong for something so innocuous, as though he is offering a confession rather than a qualification, "Embroidery. Organizing salons. Tea service, particularly imported blends."

He hesitates, then fidgets with the leather folio he's been holding, his fingers brushing its edge with a familiarity that suggests it is often near him. He opens it with care, turning it so the contents face her.

Inside are several pieces of embroidery, each wrapped in thin linen. He lifts one free.

The stitching is fine. Meticulous. Small, precise flowers worked in muted blues and greys, the thread tension even, the back nearly as clean as the front. There is nothing ostentatious about it, no attempt to dazzle. Only competence honed into something quietly beautiful.

Mirelda leans forward despite herself.

“Did you design this pattern?” She asks.

“Yes, my lady,” He says, then corrects himself again, “Lady Mirelda. I — yes. I did.”

She nods once, satisfied. This is not idle hobby work. This is discipline. The kind that comes from long hours spent perfecting something that will never be publicly credited.

“My mother encouraged it,” He continues, a touch more steadily now, “She said it was better to be exceptional at something permitted than mediocre at everything else.”

Mirelda huffs a quiet sound that is almost a smile, “Your mother sounds practical.”

“She is,” He says, too quickly, as if the statement requires defending, “Very.”

She files that away, alongside the way his hands hover over the embroidery for a moment longer than necessary before carefully returning it to the folio. He closes the case and sets it beside his chair,

posture resetting itself into something deferential.

“Those interests will be acceptable here,” Mirelda says, “Even useful. Amaranthe receives a great deal of company. Visiting nobles expect refinement. Order. A household that reflects stability.”

His eyes lift at that, just briefly, and something like relief flickers there before being carefully banked.

“I would be honoured to serve,” He replies.

The phrase is automatic. Reflexive. It slides from his mouth without resistance, as if it has been polished smooth by repetition.

Serve. Not love. Not cherish.

Mirelda notes it, the way one notes a habit that reveals training rather than inclination. He has been taught what is expected of him. He has learned how to survive by fulfilling it cleanly.

There is a brief knock at the door, precise and restrained, followed by its careful opening.

A young man steps inside, head bowed, movements practiced enough to be unobtrusive without seeming cowed. He pauses just long enough to take the room in— furniture placement, occupants, mood— before advancing the appropriate number of steps and stopping.

“My lady,” He says to Mirelda, voice steady and unadorned, then

turns to Rhalin, “Sir. Your mother asked that I bring your folio.”

Mirelda recognizes him then.

Not sharply. Not with any sense of importance. Only as one recognizes a face glimpsed earlier in passing. He is the attendant from the carriage, the one with the scuffed boots and the satchel tucked under his arm. She recalls thinking, vaguely, that he looked capable.

Up close, that impression holds.

He is sturdier than Rhalin, built for endurance rather than display. His coat fits well enough and his hands are clean, nails trimmed short, but the skin bears the faint roughness of some form of labour. His face is open in a way Rhalin’s is not. Broader at the jaw and with a nose that has likely been broken once and set imperfectly. His eyes are a clear brown, direct without being challenging, and when they meet Mirelda’s they do not flinch, nor do they linger. He knows how to look without staring.

His chestnut hair has been trimmed recently, though it refuses to lie quite flat, lifting at the crown despite effort. The effect is faintly unruly, a quiet defiance of polish that contrasts sharply with Rhalin’s meticulous restraint.

Mirelda notes, without comment, the way he positions himself half a step closer to Rhalin than strict protocol requires.

“I have it,” Rhalin says, glancing down at the leather case resting against his knee. His voice softens despite himself, the edge of formality loosening just enough to be felt, “But thank you, Corin.”

The name lands easily between them.

Corin's mouth twitches— No more than a breath of expression, quickly mastered, "Of course."

He does not move to leave immediately. Instead, he waits, hands folded loosely before him, eyes lowered in the proper manner. Mirelda notes it the way she notes the alignment of furniture in a well-kept room. It registers without demanding interpretation.

"This is my attendant," Rhalin says, straightening a fraction, as if the role itself requires him to stand taller, "Corin will be joining the household, if that is agreeable."

His fingers tighten briefly on the folio's edge.

"He has been with me for some years," He adds, "Since we were children, in fact. I don't remember a time without him."

Corin inclines his head slightly at that.

"An old fixture, then," Mirelda says mildly.

"Yes," Rhalin says, a shade too quickly, "Very much so."

"That will be acceptable," Mirelda says easily. Attendants are expected. A husband arrives with infrastructure: A valet, a secretary, sometimes a confidant trained to be silent, "He will answer to my Housekeeper-General, but his primary duty will remain with you."

Corin bows again, deeper this time.

“Thank you, my lady.”

As he straightens, his gaze flicks briefly to Rhalin and then he withdraws. The door closes behind him with careful quiet. When the latch clicks into place, Rhalin exhales. It is a slow release, unguarded, as though his body has momentarily forgotten itself. His shoulders drop a fraction before he catches himself and straightens again.

Mirelda assumes that this is nerves.

Few men greet their future wives with complete composure, particularly in a house as formidable as Amaranthe. The terror of being acquired, assessed, and folded into something larger than oneself is no small thing.

She does not yet see the other layer of it.

“So he is something of a brother to you, then,” She says, conversationally, “Given how long he has been in your family.”

Rhalin startles, only slightly. His fingers still.

“Yes. Well,” He clears his throat, “In a manner of speaking,” Another hesitation. Mirelda assumes she will be receiving a lot of apprehensive pauses out of him, “I have only brothers, you see. Three of them. Which is… not ideal, as I’m sure you understand.”

Mirelda hums, “A structural weakness.”

“Yes. Precisely. My mother used to joke that we were a warning rather than a lineage.”

“Practical women often joke about dire things.”

His mouth twitches, “She has had a great deal of practice.”

She studies him with a sidelong glance, noting the way he relaxes when speaking of inheritances and failures rather than people. It is telling, though she does not yet know why.

“If you have concerns,” She says, returning to the matter at hand, “You may speak them now. I will not pretend this arrangement is romantic, but neither need it be cruel.”

Rhalin’s fingers twist together once, then still, discipline reasserting itself.

“I only wish to… to do well,” He says quietly, “To not bring shame.”

“You will not,” Mirelda replies decisively, “Shame is born of indiscretion, not difference.”

He looks at her sharply at that, as though struck by something unexpected, then drops his gaze again. Colour rises faintly in his

cheeks.

“Yes,” He says, a little hoarse.

She mistakes it for gratitude.

Outside the parlour, negotiations continue. Celith’s voice drifts faintly through the corridor, cool and measured, Lady Avenleigh’s sharper and quicker in reply. The machinery of alliance grinds on, indifferent to the fragile human calculus unfolding in its margins.

Mirelda rises. “Walk with me. I would see how you move through the house.”

Rhalin stands at once, smoothing his sleeves, posture snapping back into place. As they step into the corridor, servants dip and withdraw with practiced invisibility. Rhalin’s gaze flickers, cataloguing exits, alcoves, the tempo of the household. He moves like someone accustomed to reading rooms before inhabiting them.

Good, Mirelda thinks, *He will not disrupt the flow.*

They pause by a long table where embroidered runners are being laid out for an upcoming gathering. Rhalin’s eyes linger, tracing the fine stitches, the careful gradation of colour.

“Amaranthe favours restrained patterns,” Mirelda says, “Symbolism over flourish.”

“They’re very well done,” He murmurs, then flushes, as if worried he has spoken out of turn.

“You may contribute. If your work meets standard, it will be used.”

For a moment his face lights, unguarded and almost boyish. Then the light tucks itself away behind composure.

“Thank you,” He says.

It is only much later— years later— that Mirelda will replay this day and recognize the quiet relief threaded through his every careful movement. The relief of being permitted usefulness rather than desire. Of being evaluated for what he can do, not what he is meant to be.

For now, she sees only a nervous young man about to be married.

And she moves on.

The days between agreement and marriage compress themselves into something brisk and purposeful.

Courtship, in the Eastern Dominions, is not a season of uncertainty. It is an interval for inspection.

Mirelda inspects quietly.

Rhalin learns the rhythms of Amaranthe with the careful attention of someone accustomed to foreign systems. He memorizes servants' routes, learns which corridors are public and which are merely tolerated, adapts his pace to the household's breathing. He dresses modestly, favours pale colours and soft fabrics, never attempts ornament beyond what is expected of a noble husband-in-waiting. When introduced, he bows just deeply enough to signal respect without abasement.

He is, by all measures, an excellent candidate.

They take tea together three times before the week is out, always in rooms that permit partial privacy. Celith believes in observation rather than intrusion. If a match is to fail, she prefers to know why early.

Rhalin pours tea beautifully. His hands are steady, movements economical, the faint tremor Mirelda noticed on their first meeting now almost entirely gone. He knows his leaves by scent alone and explains their origins with a soft, earnest precision that never tips into pedantry.

"This one is cultivated in shaded terraces," He says, indicating a pale gold infusion, "The leaves are stressed slightly before harvest. It produces a bitterness that fades quickly, which is considered desirable."

"You speak as if you have tried them all," Mirelda replies.

"I have tried many. My mother encouraged it. She said a husband should always have something he can offer guests without assistance."

Mirelda hums in approval, “Practical again.”

Rhalin smiles, small and contained. It is an expression he seems to ration.

As the days pass, she allows herself to speak a little more freely with him. Not intimately. Never that. But she asks questions that go beyond utility.

“What do you read?”

“Treatises, mostly. Game theory. Ceremonial logic. My mother’s work has a habit of bleeding into one’s education.” He pauses, “I also enjoy natural histories.”

“Plants?”

“Mostly insects.”

That catches her attention, “Insects.”

“Yes. Particularly moths.”

He says it without embarrassment, but there is an alertness there now, a tension just beneath the calm, as if he expects mockery or distaste. Mirelda can tell she surprises him by merely nodding.

“There is a greenhouse at the south end of the estate,” She says, “It

attracts a great many night pollinators."

His eyes lift, quick and bright, "I would be grateful to see it."

She agrees, and they go that evening, escorted only loosely by household custom. The greenhouse is warm and dim, glass panes catching the last light of dusk. Moths cling to the interior in soft profusion, wings folded like living brooches. Rhalin moves among them with reverence. He does not touch at first, only observes, hands clasped behind his back. Then, slowly, he produces a small case from his sleeve, fitted with pins and slips of labelled parchment.

"I only collect those already dead," He says quickly, as if defending himself, "Or those that die naturally. I don't like to harm them."

"I wouldn't have assumed you did," Mirelda replies.

He relaxes then, kneeling carefully to retrieve a fallen specimen from the sill. Its wings are dusky violet, threaded with silver veining.

"This one migrates," He says, voice low with delight, "They travel at night by the stars. Some believe they can remember routes across generations."

"That seems… impractical," Mirelda says.

"Yes," He agrees readily, "And beautiful."

She watches him as he works, the precise tenderness of his hands, the

way his focus sharpens into something almost luminous. It is easy, in this moment, to imagine affection growing here. A shared quiet. A mutual regard. The sort of story bards like to dress up as inevitability.

Mirelda feels the faint tug of that narrative and dismisses it just as easily. Romance is not the point. Compatibility is.

Still, when he looks up at her, cheeks flushed with pleasure, and asks shyly if she would like to choose one to keep in her study, she says yes.

He beams, properly, without restraint.

If she were inclined to sentiment, she might think this a good omen.

But the truth reveals itself in pieces.

Corin, meanwhile, settles into Amaranthe as if he has always belonged to its margins.

He does not draw attention. He does not speak unless spoken to. He keeps to Rhalin’s shadow with the quiet competence expected of a personal attendant, hands always occupied, posture deferential. To any outside eye, he is simply another young man traded between households, fortunate to be attached to a future lord rather than absorbed into general service.

Mirelda notices him only in fragments at first.

That Rhalin eats better when Corin is present at meals, though Corin never sits. That Rhalin's sleeves are always mended cleanly, embroidery repaired with such careful mimicry that even Mirelda, who prides herself on observation, cannot tell where the original stitch ends and the repair begins. That when Rhalin grows overwhelmed by Celith's assessments or the relentless forward momentum of nuptial planning, it is Corin who quietly intervenes—Offering tea, producing a forgotten document, redirecting attention without ever appearing to do so.

Useful, Mirelda thinks.

She approves.

It is only when Corin is required to interact with her directly that his personality emerges, not boldly, but through friction so small it would be easy to miss.

She asks him, once, whether Rhalin has eaten.

"Yes, my lady," Corin replies promptly. Then, after a heartbeat, "Enough."

It is not insolence. It is precision. Another time, she thanks him for locating a misplaced ledger.

"It was where it was supposed to be," He says, eyes lowered, "It had only been misremembered."

He does not soften the statement. He does not apologize for it either.

Mirelda raises an eyebrow. Corin does not look up.

Later, she remarks on the efficiency of Rhalin's quarters, how little excess he keeps.

"He doesn't like clutter," Corin says, "It makes thinking difficult."

"And you?" Mirelda asks, curious despite herself.

Corin pauses, "I like knowing where things are."

It is, she realizes, the closest thing to a personal preference she has heard from him. He is careful with her. Not obsequious, but guarded. His politeness has edges, like a blade kept sheathed but sharp. He does not warm to her. He does not attempt to ingratiate himself. His loyalty, it is clear, is not transferable.

Rhalin notices this, Mirelda suspects. She sees it in the way his shoulders tighten when Corin and Mirelda speak directly, the way his gaze flicks between them, assessing and bracing. He laughs a fraction too readily when Corin's dry replies land, as if smoothing something invisible.

Once, when Mirelda comments that Corin seems capable enough to be reassigned elsewhere if needed, Rhalin stiffens outright.

"He prefers to remain with me," He says quickly. Too quickly, "If that is acceptable."

Corin says nothing. His head remains bowed, his hands folded. But there is a stillness to him now that reads as attention sharpened to a point.

“It is acceptable,” Mirelda replies, puzzled by the intensity of Rhalin’s reaction but unwilling to prod it, “It was merely an observation. I see no reason to disrupt an efficient arrangement at this moment.”

Rhalin exhales, the relief visible before he can hide it. He presses his lips together, as if chastising himself for the lapse.

Later, Mirelda watches Corin pour tea for Rhalin with the same care Rhalin uses when serving her. Their movements mirror each other unconsciously. When Rhalin’s cup is slightly too full, Corin adjusts without being asked. When Corin’s sleeve slips, Rhalin reaches out to straighten it— And stops himself halfway, fingers curling back into his palm.

A small thing.

An unremarkable thing.

They return to the greenhouse once more, this time with Corin accompanying them at a respectful distance. He keeps to the edges, ostensibly there to carry Rhalin’s case, though Mirelda notes he watches the moths too, his gaze following Rhalin’s with an ease that suggests long familiarity with this particular enthusiasm.

“These are new,” Rhalin murmurs, gesturing toward a cluster near the far pane, “They weren’t here last week.”

“The weather shifted,” Corin says quietly, “They follow the warmth.”

“You remembered,” Rhalin says, and there is something dangerously close to gratitude in his voice.

Corin’s mouth twitches, “Someone has to.”

Mirelda hears it this time. The tone, dry and intimate in a way attendants are not meant to be. She glances at Corin, but his face is neutral again, attention back on his duties.

“You collect too?” She asks him, mildly.

Corin considers the question, “I assist.”

“That wasn’t the question.”

A pause. Then, carefully, “No, my lady.”

“Pity,” She says, “It seems a harmless enough interest.”

Corin’s reply is immediate, “Interests are rarely the problem.”

Rhalin freezes. The silence stretches, thin as a drawn wire. Mirelda studies Corin, but his head is bowed again.

“Indeed,” She says at last, “Perhaps that is why we learn to be tactful.”

Corin inclines his head, “Yes, my lady.”

Rhalin does not look up again for the rest of the visit.

That night, Mirelda reflects on the exchange only briefly. Corin is sharper than most attendants. More opinionated. It will require management, perhaps. But nothing he has said crosses into impropriety. And Rhalin— Rhalin continues to be nervous. That is to be expected. He is a young man on the cusp of marriage, with much to lose and little room for error. Men like him are raised to understand how fragile their position is, how easily missteps become catastrophes.

If he clings a little too tightly to what is familiar, that is forgivable.

If his attendant is a little too essential, that is understandable.

She does not yet see the fear that threads through Rhalin’s every careful movement— The way he measures his words, the way his laughter never quite reaches his eyes when Corin is present, the way relief and tension coexist in him like rival currents.

She does not yet understand that he is not afraid of marriage.

He is afraid of being *seen.*

And Corin, standing always just behind him, is both the greatest risk and the only thing keeping him steady.

For now, all Mirelda sees is efficiency. But then Rhalin begins spending more time in the greenhouse.

At first it is incidental. An hour in the late afternoon, sleeves rolled carefully, catalogue case tucked under one arm. Then it becomes habitual. Morning light instead of evening. A chair dragged into the warmest corner. Labels rewritten in a finer hand. He learns which panes catch the dawn first and which moths cling there longest, wings still and patient as pressed flowers.

Corin is with him more often than not.

Not always at his side. Sometimes standing back. They speak quietly, voices pitched low enough to blend with the hum of insects and the soft creak of settling glass.

Mirelda notices the change without comment. If anything, she approves. The greenhouse is contained. Predictable. It keeps Rhalin occupied without inviting scrutiny. And he is, unmistakably, calmer.

One morning, she prepares for a short hunt.

Nothing ceremonial. No banners, no visiting nobles. Just Mirelda, her Hunting Marshal, two riders, and a brace of hounds along the lower fields where vermin have been troubling the tenants. She dresses quickly, efficiently, braids her hair tight, checks her rifle.

Rhalin waits near the steps, hands folded, coat neat. Corin stands a

pace behind him, already wearing outdoor boots.

“I will be gone a few hours,” Mirelda says, “Perhaps longer, depending.”

“Yes, Lady Mirelda,” Rhalin replies.

There is a moment where custom might demand something more. There are expectations, of course. A bride-to-be is meant to permit certain familiarities. Some visible sign that affection, however arranged, is at least plausible. A kiss for luck. A hand squeezed. Some token to reassure watching eyes that this is, indeed, a marriage in progress.

Mirelda gives none.

She nods once, curt and satisfied, and turns toward the yard.

Behind her, Rhalin exhales.

When Mirelda returns later that afternoon, the hunt has gone well. Three clean shots. No wasted movement. The kind of efficiency that steadies her thoughts and settles the restlessness beneath her ribs. She enters through the side wing, gun cradled loosely over her shoulder, boots echoing faintly against stone. Servants scatter appropriately. No one speaks.

She shrugs out of her coat, about to hand her rifle off to the armoury, and pauses.

There is a small case in her free hand.

A moth specimen she had taken from a hedgerow at the field's edge, wings intact despite the chill. Pale, almost translucent. Uncommon enough to merit note. She had thought, idly, that Rhalin might like to see it.

She turns toward the greenhouse, rifle now slung over her shoulder.

As she rounds the corner into the east corridor of the greenhouse, she hears voices. It's not loud. It's intimate.

She slows without conscious thought.

Rhalin's voice reaches her first, stripped of its careful polish, "We have to be careful. Here, especially."

A second voice answers, low and urgent. Corin.

"It will be all right," Corin says, "I'll stay close. I won't draw attention."

"You always say that," Rhalin murmurs, but there is no rebuke in it. Only fear, "But with some of the things you're saying— It's dangerous. You need to hold your tongue around her more. You don't understand how easily things could—"

"I do," Corin cuts in, "I understand perfectly. I'm sorry— I'll be more careful. But I'm not going anywhere."

There is a pause. Mirelda steps closer, soundless as habit, the case still tucked under her arm, rifle slung over her shoulder.

“I thought—” Rhalin begins, then stops, “I thought it would be worse. Being here. Being… watched.”

“And it isn’t,” Corin says.

“No,” Rhalin exhales, “She doesn’t touch me. She doesn’t look at me like that. I think—” He hesitates, voice dropping, “I think she truly doesn’t care.”

Corin lets out a breath he has been holding, “Good.”

“I feel like I can breathe,” Rhalin continues, words tumbling now, unguarded, “Like I can exist without pretending at something I don’t understand. I thought marriage would—” He swallows. “I thought it would take everything from me.”

Corin’s reply is immediate, “It won’t. I won’t let it.”

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can promise you won’t face it alone.”

Another pause. Softer now. Filled with the rustle of leaves, the distant murmur of water pipes, the hush of a place meant for growth rather

than witness.

“But she could still ruin us,” Rhalin says faintly.

There is movement. Mirelda steps closer, peering through the open door of a small sitting room adjoining the greenhouse. She sees them clearly now.

Rhalin stands with his back half-turned, shoulders curved inward as though bracing against the world. Corin faces him, hands clasped with his, fingers interlaced. Corin’s forehead rests against Rhalin’s temple, protective and intimate in a way no attendant’s posture ever is.

Rhalin nods against him, eyes closed.

The gesture is unmistakable.

Mirelda’s mind clicks, neatly, like a puzzle piece sliding home.

It is not shock that washes through her, nor anger. It is clarity. All the small details reorder themselves. The tension that never quite aligned with ordinary nerves. The relief at usefulness. The deflection of Corin being compared to a brother. The way Rhalin brightened around the lack of touch or affections. The guarded bluntness of Corin’s loyalty.

She watches another moment, long enough to understand the depth of it. Long enough to recognize that whatever this is, it is not fleeting, nor reckless. It is careful. It has survived by being careful.

Then she steps forward. The floorboard creaks beneath her boot.

She clears her throat once, deliberately.

“Rhalin.”

The sound of her voice cuts through the room like a blade laid flat on a table.

They break apart at once.

Corin sees her first.

The change in him is immediate and profound, as though something vital has been pulled loose from inside his chest. Colour drains from his face in a single rush, leaving his skin ashen, lips bloodless. His usual guarded composure fractures, replaced by naked, animal fear. His eyes go wide, glassy and unfocused, darting once to Mirelda’s face and then away, as if he cannot bear to meet her gaze.

He drops to his knees without instruction.

The motion is abrupt and clumsy. His palms strike the stone floor and remain there, fingers splayed, as though he needs the ground itself to hold him upright. He bows so deeply his spine rounds, his head lowered until his forehead nearly touches the floor.

Rhalin does not move.

He stands frozen where he is, breath stalled halfway to his lungs, chest locked tight. When he turns, his face has gone pale beneath the flush left by Corin's nearness, the colour retreating until even his mouth looks grey. His eyes are too bright, pupils blown wide. They flick once — only once— to the rifle slung loosely over Mirelda's shoulder, to the small case tucked beneath her arm.

A calculation, sharp and terrified.

He swallows hard. The sound carries in the quiet.

Mirelda takes in the room with a hunter's economy.

The open specimen case on the table, its velvet lining exposed, moth wings arranged with reverent care, catching the low light in threads of silver and violet. The absurd fragility of them, pinned and perfect, set against the rawness of what she has interrupted.

The heat still lingering between the two men, as palpable as a scent.

She does not raise her voice.

"Corin," She says evenly, "Leave us."

Corin's shoulders jerk. A shudder runs through him, visible even from where she stands. He lifts his head just enough for his face to be seen, and the expression there is ruinous. His jaw trembles. His eyes are wet, lashes clumped together, terror warring with something fiercer and more defiant beneath it.

“My lady— please,” He blurts, the words tripping over one another, “Please. I can explain— I swear, I never meant—”

“I am not interested in speaking to you,” Mirelda says, her tone flattening into something colder and harder, “You will go to the servants’ wing. You will remain there until summoned. Rhalin will be unharmed.”

Corin’s face contorts at that, relief and fear crashing together. He drags in a ragged breath.

His eyes flick to Rhalin, desperate now. Whatever careful reserve he once maintained around Mirelda is gone, burned away by the immediacy of loss. His mouth opens, closes again. His throat works.

“I swear,” He says hoarsely, voice breaking, “I swear I never meant to put him in danger. I would never—”

Mirelda adjusts her grip on the rifle. It is a small movement. Practical. Not threatening. Shifting her shoulder and one hand gripping the sling.

It is enough.

“Go,” She says again, firmer now, “You are not helping him by lingering.”

Corin bows.

It is not graceful. Not correct. It is too deep, too fast, a broken reflex dragged up from whatever training once kept him safe. His head nearly snaps forward with the force of it. When he straightens, tears have spilled over at last, tracking down his cheeks unchecked. He looks at Rhalin once more, openly now, with something fierce and apologetic and aching all at once. His lips shape a word he does not speak.

Then he turns and flees.

His footsteps are uneven, nearly a stumble, boots striking stone as he disappears down the corridor and exits the greenhouse. The sound echoes longer than it should.

When it finally fades, the silence he leaves behind is dense enough to press against the ears.

Rhalin exhales.

The sound is thin and shaking, more a collapse than a breath. Whatever composure he had been clinging to gives way entirely. His shoulders fold inward, spine curving as though he has been struck from behind. His hands curl into fists at his sides, knuckles whitening, then loosen again as if he no longer has the strength to hold himself together.

He swallows, again and again. His eyes shine wetly now, lashes trembling, tears threatening but not yet falling.

“L–Lady Mirelda,” He says, and his voice cracks on her name, “I can explain. It— it isn’t what it looked like.”

She regards him for a long moment.

His face is open in a way it has never been before. Fear has stripped away his careful pleasantness, leaving something raw and almost boyish beneath it. His mouth trembles. His gaze cannot quite hold hers, flicking down and away and back again, as though bracing for the blow he is certain must come.

“It was exactly what it looked like,” She says calmly, “You needn’t insult either of us by pretending otherwise.”

He flinches as though struck across the face.

“I—” His breath hitches, sharp and panicked, “Please. Please. I know what this means. I know I’ve shamed you, and my family, and—” His voice breaks completely now, “If you wish to end it, I understand. I do. But I beg you— don’t— don’t tell my mother. Don’t—”

“Sit down,” Mirelda says.

The command lands cleanly, honed by years of expectation and obedience. Rhalin obeys without thinking, knees weakening beneath him as he collapses onto the edge of the table. He sits hunched forward, shoulders drawn tight, hands clasped together between his knees as if to stop them shaking.

Mirelda sets the rifle aside, leaning it carefully against the wall. She places the moth specimen on a nearby table, aligning the case neatly with the edge, the way she does everything. Only when her hands are empty does she turn back to him.

“You have not shamed me,” She says, “Not yet.”

Rhalin looks up at her, startled, confusion cutting through the panic for the first time.

“I am not offended,” She continues, “Nor am I particularly surprised, in hindsight. What you are is inconvenient. There is a difference.”

Rhalin lets out a sound that scrapes out of him before he can stop it. It might, in another life, have been laughter. Here, it collapses under its own weight, breathless and broken.

“Inconvenient,” He echoes faintly, as if testing whether the word will cut him if he touches it again.

Mirelda watches his reaction closely.

He does not bristle. He does not protest. He does not demand fairness. The word does not insult him so much as it confirms something he has always known: that his existence, properly examined, has always been an obstacle to be navigated rather than a desire to be honoured. That there was never going to be a version of this where he emerged unscathed.

She briefly considers asking how long Corin has been more than an attendant. Years, she suspects. Long enough for habits to root. Long enough for fear to become second nature. But that knowledge would be ornamental, not useful.

Business it is, then.

“Yes,” She says, stepping closer, stopping at a respectful distance. Close enough to be heard. Far enough not to crowd him, “Which means this will require structure.”

He scrubs at his face with the heel of his hand, dragging moisture away clumsily, breathing uneven and sharp. His lashes are dark with unshed tears, his nose reddened, his composure hanging by threads he no longer bothers to hide.

“You’re…” He swallows, “You’re not angry.”

“I do not waste anger on things that can be managed,” Mirelda replies, “This can be managed.”

His head lifts at that, quick and fragile. Hope flickers across his face like a match struck in a drafty room.

“Managed… how?”

She considers him the way she might a ledger with an unexpected deficit. Not with disdain, but with focus. What must be balanced. What can be shifted. What losses are tolerable.

“The marriage will proceed,” She says.

Rhalin stiffens as though struck by cold.

“It will?”

“Yes.”

“But—” His voice falters, disbelief and fear tangling together, “After this— why?”

“Because dissolving it would raise questions I have no interest in answering. Because my aunt has already signalled acceptance. Because your family requires this alliance more than mine does, which makes them pliable. Because I require heirs, and I will not invite scandal to secure them.”

Each reason lands with measured force. None of them are kind. All of them are true.

He stares at her, stunned, mouth slightly parted, as though she has spoken in a language he was never taught to expect mercy in.

“You… still expect me to—” His throat works, “To be your husband.”

“I expect you to perform the role,” Mirelda corrects, “Publicly, you will be attentive. Deferential. You will praise my judgement, accompany me when required, and never, under any circumstances, give the impression that you find me lacking as a wife.”

Rhalin nods automatically, the motion ingrained deeper than fear. Tears slip free now, tracking unimpeded down his cheeks, but he does not bother to wipe them away.

“Of course,” He says hoarsely, “I swear. I would never—”

“Privately,” She continues, unsoftened by his distress, “Your arrangements with Corin may continue. Discreetly. He will remain your attendant. That proximity already exists; removing it would invite scrutiny.”

The sound Rhalin makes this time is unmistakable. A strangled, gasping breath.

“You would…” His voice nearly fails him, “You would allow that?”

“I am not allowing it for your comfort. I am allowing it because a content husband is easier to manage than a desperate one. And because I have no desire to ruin you.”

His head bows sharply, shoulders shaking as the last of his restraint gives way.

“Thank you,” He whispers, the words scraped raw, “I don’t deserve—”

“That is irrelevant,” She says crisply, “You will, however, understand the limits of my tolerance.”

“Yes— Y–yes, of course.”

“I will not be a wife known for a disinterested husband,” Mirelda says,

“Nor will I be the subject of whispers about your proclivities. Nobles gossip. They always have. You will give them nothing to feed on.”

“I— I will be more careful,” he promises immediately, voice rough and unsteady, “I swear it.”

“You will be invisible,” She corrects, “Your affection for Corin will not exist beyond closed doors. If I hear even a rumour that threatens my reputation, I will act.”

She lets that settle, then adds, measured and deliberate, “In return, I will not be *that* wife.”

He looks up at her, startled.

“I will not keep a lover in plain sight,” Mirelda continues, “I will not parade favours or allow a household intimacy to become a public joke at your expense. I will not humiliate you, nor your family, by inviting comparison or speculation,” Her gaze sharpens slightly, “Discretion will be mutual. Appearances will be preserved on both sides.”

Something in his expression loosens. It’s not relief, exactly, but a fragile recognition of fairness where he had not expected it.

“You will not be shamed through me,” She concludes, “That would be inefficient.”

He bows his head, breath hitching. “Thank you,” He whispers, the word carrying more weight than gratitude alone.

She accepts it with a single nod and moves on. This next issue she needs to address will likely make whatever gratitude he feels evaporate rather quickly.

“And finally, I still expect children.”

The words land heavier than any threat. Rhalin’s breath stutters, catching painfully in his chest. His face drains of what little colour has returned.

“Children.”

“Yes. Three, at minimum. You are young. Healthy. There is no reason this should be impossible.”

He looks away, jaw trembling, eyes fixed on nothing in particular. When he speaks again, it is barely audible.

“I… I will try.”

“You will do more than try,” Mirelda says unyieldingly, “You will succeed. I will not bear illegitimate children, nor will I invite some man into my bed and risk his claim to my estate. Our children will be ours, unquestionably.”

Silence stretches between them, taut and fragile, threaded with everything neither of them is saying.

“I hope that you can stomach the idea of touching me, despite

despising my sex."

He flinches, then forces himself to meet her gaze. His expression is naked now, stripped of polish and pretence, "I don't despise your sex," He says earnestly, voice shaking, "It's just… different. Not what my heart knows how to—"

"I do not require your desire," Mirelda interrupts, "Only your compliance."

Something in him steadies at that. With that, she turns away, decision complete, and retrieves her rifle.

"You will collect yourself," She says over her shoulder, "We will speak no more of this unless circumstances demand it."

"Yes, Lady Mirelda," Rhalin murmurs.

She leaves him there, surrounded by moths pinned in careful rows, their fragile wings preserved at exquisite cost, a quiet testament to beauty that survives only when it learns how not to move.

Mirelda lies awake long after the house has settled into its nightly silence.

Her bedchamber is vast without being ostentatious, its proportions inherited from an older age of architecture when power was expressed through space rather than ornament. The ceiling arches gently

overhead, ribbed with pale stone that catches the moonlight slipping in through tall, mullioned windows. Heavy curtains of forest-green wool are drawn back tonight, tied neatly at their centres, allowing the moon an unobstructed view of the room. It paints the floor in bands of silver, illuminating the inlaid woodwork and the faint sheen of polished marble around the hearth.

The bed itself is a low, wide thing, built of dark oak and carved with the Amaranthe crest along the headboard. No flowers. No frippery. The linens are plain but exquisite, cool and crisp against her skin, scented faintly of lavender and ironed smooth by servants who know better than to leave a wrinkle in the bed of the house's future matriarch.

A small writing desk sits near the window, papers stacked in careful order. A rack of weapons rests along one wall— Hunting rifle cleaned and oiled, sidearm locked away, ceremonial blade mounted above it, never touched. Across from that, a bookcase filled with ledgers, histories of the Eastern Dominions, colonial charters, maps inked and re-inked as borders shift. There are no mirrors placed carelessly here. Only one, angled deliberately, large enough to dress by and nothing more.

Mirelda stares up at the ceiling, hands folded over her abdomen, breathing slow and even as she was taught. Sleep does not come. Her mind keeps circling back, methodical and relentless, to the greenhouse.

To the sight of Rhalin's hands twined with Corin's. The way their foreheads had touched, intimate and instinctive. The way Corin's voice had softened when he said, *"I'll be more careful."*

Careful.

She exhales through her nose.

They are fretting now. She knows it as surely as she knows the weight of her rifle or the measure of her estate lands. Rhalin, alone amid his pinned moths, replaying every word she spoke, every inflection, every pause where he thought she might condemn him outright. Corin, somewhere in the servants' wing, likely pressed against a wall or crouched on a pallet, shaking, imagining chains or dismissal or worse.

Men imagine the worst. They are taught to.

Mirelda turns her head slightly, gazing toward the wall that separates her chambers from Rhalin's future rooms. Not yet his by right, but close enough that she can picture the arrangement already: His belongings brought in quietly, his life folded into the rhythms of Amaranthe without ceremony. She wonders if he is crying still, or if the tears have dried, leaving only that tight, hollow expression she has seen on men who have survived something they were certain would destroy them.

She had not planned to think about this tonight.

She had not planned to think about *him* in this way at all.

Until today, Rhalin had existed in her mind as a problem to be solved. A suitable husband. A pleasant enough boy with gentle manners and a talent for quiet things. He was agreeable, deferential, and unambitious; all traits she had valued not out of affection but utility. He would wear her name well. He would not challenge her authority. He would give her heirs and then retreat into domestic obscurity, content with his embroidery and tea.

She had not thought about what his inner life might look like.

She closes her eyes.

There is a word, in the Eastern Dominions, for men like Rhalin.

Several, depending on region and cruelty.

In polite company, the term is *soft-hearted*, said with a delicate wrinkle of the nose. Among officers and magistrates, it becomes *wayward,* or *misaligned.* In the more superstitious provinces, they are called *crooked-souled,* believed to be men whose spirits bent the wrong way at birth.

The oldest word— the one rarely spoken aloud— is *velour.* Once it meant something like refinement, softness of cloth. Over time it curdled, becoming shorthand for men who desired other men, men thought to be too indulgent, too inward, too concerned with beauty. Men who did not fit the expected appetite for women and obedience.

Velours were whispered about. Joked about, sometimes. Punished, often.

For women, it was different.

Mirelda thinks of her cousin Elsenne, three years her senior, who lives on a coastal holding with her *companion.* Everyone knows what companions are. They are never introduced as lovers. Never acknowledged as anything but loyal friends, shared households explained away as convenience or infirmity or sentimentality. Two women living together is seen as quaint, indulgent, even admirable if they are both noble. A private arrangement that harms no one, so long as duties are still met.

Elsenne, notably, has refused every marriage prospect put before her.

That will cost her.

Not immediately. Not publicly. But one day, quietly, she will be written out of certain considerations. Inheritance will shift sideways. Invitations will dwindle. The family will sigh about her *choices* and eventually decide they have indulged her long enough.

Still— Elsenne lives freely, in her own way.

Men do not have that luxury.

Men's lives are scaffolds built by women. Their mothers, their aunts, their future wives. They are raised to be fitted into households like furniture— Valued for how well they serve a space, how little disruption they cause. A man who rejects the expected desire for women is not merely deviant; he is defective. A broken tool. A refusal of purpose. In some provinces, velour men are fined. In others, quietly reassigned to religious houses or labour colonies under the guise of moral correction. In the stricter eastern ports, it is still illegal, though prosecutions are rare and selective, used more as leverage than justice.

Mirelda opens her eyes again, staring at the faint crack in the ceiling stone where mortar has shifted over decades.

She had never spared these thoughts before. Why would she? Men's inner lives are not a subject of study at the academies. Their feelings are considered ornamental at best, dangerous at worst. Compassion for them is framed as softness, a liability in women meant to rule.

And yet.

She thinks of Rhalin's voice when he said, *"I don't despise your sex. It's just… different."*

There had been no malice in it. No insult. Just confusion and fear layered atop obligation. She shifts slightly beneath the covers, the linen whispering against her skin.

Mirelda does not feel… betrayed. Or even surprised, necessarily.

She might have, once. If she were another woman, perhaps— If she were one who expected romance, or at least the performance of it. But Mirelda has never been sentimental about marriage. Her aunt Celith ensured that. From a young age, Mirelda was taught that marriage is infrastructure. A way to stabilise power, secure succession, quiet gossip.

Love was never part of the equation.

So what, then, unsettles her now?

It is not jealousy. She does not want Rhalin's hands. She does not ache at the thought of him giving tenderness to another. If anything, she feels… relief. Relief that his distance was not rejection of her person, but simply the shape of his desire.

She exhales, slow and controlled.

Mirelda feels sympathy.

That, perhaps, is the most dangerous thing.

Sympathy invites questions. Sympathy erodes certainty. And certainty is what she has been groomed to embody.

Still, she cannot help imagining the terror of that moment. Of being seen, truly seen, by the woman who will own his name, his reputation, and his future. She had held a rifle. She had spoken calmly. She had decided his fate in the span of minutes.

She wonders what he thought she would do.

Order Corin beaten? Dismissed into poverty? Demand public repentance? Have him sent to one of the coastal “reform” institutions where men come back quieter, thinner, eyes hollowed out?

None of that had appealed to her. Not because she is kind, she tells herself. But because it would have been inefficient.

She turns onto her side, facing the window now. The moon is high, distant, impassive.

Rhalin’s desires do not make him weak. If anything, it makes him more fragile within the system— And thus more dependent on her discretion. He will obey not out of fear alone, but gratitude. He will perform the role she requires with care, knowing that his survival, and Corin’s, rests on her continued goodwill.

It is a strange leverage. She does not relish it, but she understands it.

Her expectations remain unchanged. She will have children. She will secure the Amaranthe line. Rhalin will do his duty in the bedchamber, however awkwardly, however distantly, and afterward he may retreat to the arms that comfort him.

She will not be humiliated. He will not be destroyed.

Order will be maintained.

And yet… Some small, inconvenient part of her mind keeps returning to the thought of how precarious the world must be for men like him. How narrow the paths available. How one misstep could unravel everything.

Mirelda closes her eyes again.

Tomorrow, the household will wake and move as it always does. Contracts will be reviewed. Preparations will continue. Courtship will conclude. The machinery of marriage will grind forward. Tonight, though, she allows herself this single indulgence: To acknowledge, privately, that Rhalin Avenleigh is not merely a husband-to-be, but a person shaped by forces she has never had to navigate.

It does not make her softer.

But it does make her… attentive.

And that, she decides as sleep finally begins to claim her, may prove useful indeed.

Some time later, the marriage contract lies open across Mirelda's desk like a patient awaiting incision.

The desk itself is old Amaranthe work. Dark yew polished to a mirror sheen, its edges worn smooth by generations of women who ruled from behind it. The parchment is thick, vellum-grade, its margins already dense with standard Dominion language. At each corner, Celith has placed small carved weights— River-stone figurines depicting Alira with her hands clenched around the cloak of her husband-god.

A priestess sits to Mirelda's left, robed in layered greys, her head shaved close in the temple style. She has brought the canonical text and a narrow inkstick blessed that morning, but she does not interfere unless asked. Her role is witness, not guidance.

Celith stands at Mirelda's shoulder, cane resting lightly against her thigh, eyes sharp and attentive.

Mirelda reads.

She does not rush. She does not skim. Every clause is weighed for implication as much as content, though some, she decides, requires some editing.

Her stylus moves in clean, decisive strokes.

Clause III: Name and Household Standing of the Husband

Upon completion of the Rite of Binding, the groom, Rhalin Avenleigh of the Eastern Capital, shall relinquish his natal house name and be known thereafter as Rhalin Amaranthe, Consort of House Amaranthe.

Mirelda pauses only long enough to underline *Amaranthe* once, firmly.

No hyphenation. No courtesy retention. An Amaranthe husband bears the house name or he does not bear one at all.

He shall reside permanently upon Amaranthe lands unless expressly permitted otherwise by his wife or her appointed guardian.

She adds in the margin, neat and unambiguous:

Permission not transferable. No appeals to natal family.

Celith hums quietly in approval.

Clause VI: Domestic and Representational Duties

The husband shall oversee the private domestic sphere, including the coordination of household servants, preparation of internal gatherings, and reception of visiting dignitaries when appropriate.

Mirelda taps the stylus against the page once, then writes:

Add: instruction of younger consorts in etiquette, needlework, and household comportment, where applicable.

Rhalin's talents are not ornamental. They are leverage. A useful husband is a protected one.

Clause IX: Dowry and External Kin Considerations

As House Avenleigh offers no lands of strategic value, a ceremonial dowry of fifteen silver talons shall be rendered to House Amaranthe in observance of tradition. All estates, holdings, and colonial interests shall remain solely under Amaranthe authority.

No member of House Avenleigh, save the husband himself, shall possess custodial claims, or residence entitlements within Amaranthe lands, nor shall any external kin advance petitions by virtue of this marriage.

Mirelda's stylus pauses only a fraction of a second.

She adds, beneath the clause, in the same precise hand:

At the wife's discretion, limited patronage may be extended to external kin of the husband in the form of introductions, educational placements, or temporary stipends. Such patronage constitutes neither obligation nor precedent and may be withdrawn without cause.

She reads it once more, assessing. This does not invite Avenleigh men into her household. It does not create claim, nor expectation, nor protection under law.

It creates leverage.

A brother placed quietly into a clerkship. Another recommended to a trade house that owes Amaranthe a favour. Support given sideways, deniable, revocable.

Enough to stabilize. Not enough to entangle.

Celith's cane taps once against the floor. Agreement.

Clause X: Conduct, Bearing, and Public Discipline

The husband shall comport himself with humility, restraint, and reverence in all public appearances. He shall speak only when addressed unless otherwise instructed and defer to his wife in all matters of authority.

Mirelda does not alter this clause. Instead, she places a small checkmark beside it. Rhalin must follow this one carefully, should he want his life to continue as it is.

Clause XII: Marital Access and Intimacy

The husband shall make himself available to his wife for marital companionship at her discretion. Physical intimacy shall be governed by duty, decorum, and with obedience to the wife's will remaining paramount.

Mirelda exhales softly through her nose, a controlled release that signals dissatisfaction rather than fatigue.

“Tepid wording,” She says.

Mirelda reads the sentence again, slower this time. *Make himself available. Obedience remaining paramount.* It is functional language. Traditional. Careless in its assumptions.

She draws a line beneath *obedience,* then underlines it again, harder.

In the margin she writes, neat and angular:

Clarify: intimacy is granted, not owed. Refusal requires no justification.

She pauses, stylus hovering. The room is quiet save for the faint crackle of the hearth and the soft rasp of parchment beneath her hand. Then, smaller, tucked beneath the first note where only a careful reader will notice it, she adds:

Participation requires expressed consent at the time of engagement.

The word *consent* sits there, plain and unadorned. Not radical enough to draw censure. Not gentle enough to be mistaken for indulgence.

She caps it with one final line, sharper:

Correctional authority remains intact during courtship and marriage.

The priestess's pen scratches quietly as she transcribes the amendments into the canonical ledger, her expression carefully neutral. If she notes the subtle shift— from entitlement to permission — she gives no sign.

Celith's mouth tightens, just barely. Not disapproval. Calculation.

Clause XIV: Rights of Petition and Redress

The husband may submit written petitions to his wife regarding matters of personal welfare or grievance. The wife is not obligated to respond, though consideration is encouraged. The husband may retain a personal stipend and any movable goods brought into the marriage for his private use.

Mirelda strikes through the second sentence with a single, clean line.

"No independent allowances beyond stipend," She says aloud, "He brings no assets worth protecting from himself."

It is not cruel. It is simply true. Rhalin's value is not monetary. Allowing him the illusion of private wealth would only invite theft, coercion, or misplaced pride. She can only protect him so much, and a further allowance on top of the edit to marital intimacy will result in questions. Ultimately, Mirelda's family comes first. She will not invite scrutiny.

Celith inclines her head, "Agreed."

The priestess notes the revision without comment.

Clause XVII: Discipline and Correction

In cases of disobedience, impropriety, or conduct unbecoming the house, the wife reserves the right to enact correction. Such correction may be verbal, physical, or social in nature. Public correction is discouraged but lawful.

Excessive correction may be reviewed by the Matronal Court.

Mirelda reads the section twice. The first time as a noblewoman. The second as a woman who has seen what panic does to a carefully trained man.

She circles *excessive,* then writes beside it:

Define threshold. Reposition clause to avoid implication of volatility.

She taps the parchment once with the stylus, precise.

“I will not be mistaken for erratic,” She says, “Nor will he.”

She does not object to the authority itself. Discipline is not cruelty. It is governance. But governance must be legible, predictable, and survivable.

Celith says nothing, which is its own form of approval.

Clause XXII: Intellectual and Artistic Contributions

The husband may engage in approved artistic or scholarly pursuits, including embroidery, calligraphy, or cultural salons, subject to the wife's consent. Publications or public exhibitions require prior approval.

Mirelda leaves this untouched. Her gaze lingers, just a fraction longer than necessary.

She imagines Rhalin bent over a frame, shoulders eased, fingers precise as they draw silk through linen. Or when he pins moths to a small display. The quiet competence of it. The way his breath steadies when his hands are occupied.

There is no threat in this. Only utility. And something like mercy, though she does not name it.

"Let him have something," Mirelda murmurs.

Celith does not respond.

Clause XXX: Issue and Succession

Any offspring produced by the union shall bear the Amaranthe name. The wife retains sole authority over education, religious instruction, and placement. The husband may offer counsel when invited.

Here, Mirelda's stylus pauses. Longer than anywhere else.

This is the true cost of the arrangement. Not exposure. Not scandal. But the quiet violence of expectation laid against a man whose desires run elsewhere, whose body will be required to perform a function it was never trained to want.

She writes carefully, deliberately:

Minimum expectation: three children. One heir, two spares.

The words are stark. Unapologetic. Then, decisively, she adds beneath it:

All heirs must be of the body. No external paternity claims recognized.

No lovers. No surrogates. No rumours of borrowed seed. The lineage must be unassailable. The priestess looks up at that, eyes sharp with doctrinal interest, then nods once and records it without comment.

The closing vow remains unchanged:

With this union, both parties bind themselves to the continuance, honour, and authority of House Amaranthe, in accordance with the Covenant of Alira and the laws of the Eastern Dominions.

Mirelda leans back at last, stylus set aside. The parchment before her is dense with ink now, weighted with obligation and carefully measured allowances.

“This will suffice,” She says.

Celith studies the marked document, then lifts her gaze to her niece, “He will sign?”

“He will,” Mirelda replies, “And he will abide by it.”

Because he must. Because the alternatives are worse. Because survival in this world is rarely gentle, but it can be structured.

This contract will not be kind.

But it will be survivable.

The wedding of an Amaranthe is a public spectacle.

From dawn, the estate is awake in layers. Bells toll from the lower field chapel first, calling servants and dependents to witness from the outer courts. By midmorning, the inner bells answer, deeper and richer, their sound reserved for invited houses, magistrates, clergy, and colonial delegates. By the time the third peal rings, the hills around the estate are already dotted with carriages, banners snapping in the wind like declarations.

Mirelda watches it all from the eastern gallery.

Below her, the approach road gleams pale with crushed limestone. House banners line it in strict order of precedence: Amaranthe first, of course— deep wine-red field, the river-bind sigil stitched in silver thread— then the lesser houses, each a reminder of reach and obligation. Even the colonies are represented. Mirelda recognizes the colors of two maritime concerns and at least one inland textile syndicate. She notes which banners are newer, which have been recently repaired, which are frayed at the edges and still flown anyway.

By the time Mirelda begins to move out and steps into the High Chapel further afield, every tier of seating is filled. Hundreds of guests occupy the rising marble galleries, all arranged by relevance: The great houses closest to the dais, then lesser nobles, colonial delegates, magistrates, clerks, and finally the sanctioned observers— Dependents, favoured servants, distant kin allowed presence but not voice. The air is heavy with incense and heat, the kind that presses against the skin and reminds one of bodies gathered for judgment.

The chapel itself is an assertion. Pale stone walls etched with river-script. Pillars carved in the likenesses of matron saints not as mothers or lovers, but as lawmakers, conquerors, judges. Even the light enters reluctantly, filtered through high windows of smoked glass that tint the morning sun into something solemn and restrained.

Mirelda stands alone at the centre of the floor.

Not at the dais. Not beneath the Covenant sigils. The space around her has been cleared deliberately, the circle of stone polished smooth by generations of oath-taking. This is where authority is claimed, not conferred. Where names change hands. Where the Covenant expects a body capable of bearing consequence.

The dais rises behind her, occupied by the Preceptor-General and the attending priestesses, but the focus remains on her stillness.

Her wedding gown is heavy, though not ostentatious. Weight without indulgence. The silk is pearl-grey, layered and structured, cut to enforce posture rather than invite admiration. The collar rises high at her throat, embroidered in pale gold with the river motifs of her house, restrained, unmistakable. The sleeves are fitted, the cuffs weighted. No lace. No trailing frills. Nothing that might flutter or soften under scrutiny.

The gown is made to endure ceremony. To remain upright beneath prolonged attention.

Mirelda keeps her gaze forward. She does not look to confirm who watches her. She already knows.

Celith sits among the senior matrons, cane resting across her knees, posture unyielding despite age. Her eyes are sharp, appraising, and missing nothing. Celith has staked her niece's authority publicly. She will see it proven here.

A few younger women in the pews lean forward, assessing, already imagining how this marriage might reconfigure alliances they will one day inherit.

The bells fall silent.

The Preceptor-General strikes stone once with her staff. The sound echoes through the vaulted chapel, sharp enough to still even private breath.

"We convene under the Covenant," She declares, "To witness a lawful union. To bind name to name, obligation to obligation, future to

future.”

Mirelda does not blink.

“Let the claimant husband present himself.”

There is a pause. Then footsteps sound against stone.

Rhalin steps forward from the assembled ranks. He emerges from the gathered assembly of his former house and walks alone across the open floor toward her. He wears claimant white, unadorned, the fabric plain. It marks him as unclaimed but intended, a body awaiting inscription. On many men, it reads as humility. On him, it looks like exposure.

He walks carefully, each step measured, as though counting the distance might grant him control over it. His shoulders are squared by training rather than confidence. His chin is lifted just enough to avoid impropriety, his eyes lowered just enough to avoid challenge.

Mirelda sees the tension in his hands, clasped too tightly before him, fingers interlaced as though he might otherwise reach for something forbidden. She sees the way his breath shortens as he nears her, the minute hitch as the space between them closes. She sees the discipline it takes him not to look sideways. Not to seek reassurance where it would be ruinous to be seen doing so.

She does not move to meet him. He stops exactly three paces away, as protocol dictates, and lowers himself to one knee. The sound of it—fabric against stone, the faint exhale he cannot fully suppress—carries.

A murmur ripples through the galleries. Mirelda looks down at him.

Only then does she allow herself to register the rest of the room.

Corin stands among the lesser attendants, dressed in dark livery, his role officially unremarkable. His posture is correct. Head bowed. Hands folded. Everything about him reads as obedient.

Everything except his eyes.

They are fixed on Rhalin with an intensity that borders on feral. Not pleading. Not despairing. Furious. Stripped bare of artifice by the ritual's cruelty. For a moment, Mirelda thinks— absurdly— that if she were to give the wrong signal, if she were to misstep, he might actually move. The look on his face is not grief alone. It is the rage of someone forced to watch a beloved thing be taken under colour of law.

Nothing like the groveling in the greenhouse. Now, with all this ceremony, fear and sadness had been replaced with hatred.

The Preceptor-General's voice cuts cleanly through the moment.

"Mirelda Amaranthe. Do you enter this union of your own authority, with full right to claim, command, and correct within it?"

"I do," Mirelda answers, voice steady, carrying without effort.

"Rhalin of House Avenleigh," The priestess continues, gaze lowering

to where he kneels, “You have approached of your own will. Do you present yourself to be received into House Amaranthe, relinquishing former claim, name, and precedence?”

Rhalin inhales. The sound is small, but Mirelda hears it.

“I do,” He says.

His voice does not break.

The Declaration of Standing follows immediately. There is no space for reflection. The Covenant does not allow sentiment to settle. A clerk steps forward with the marriage ledger, its pages thick and edges gilded.

The Preceptor-General reads aloud.

“Let it be recorded that upon this union, Rhalin of Avenleigh shall take the name Amaranthe. His standing shall be that of consort-husband. His duties shall include the management of domestic quarters, representation of the household when delegated, and comportment befitting the dignity of his wife’s name.”

Rhalin remains kneeling. He does not look up.

“This standing is conditional upon obedience, discretion, and fidelity to the house above all former allegiance.”

The words settle over him like a mantle he cannot refuse. Mirelda

watches his jaw tighten, just slightly. This is the part men fear most. Not obedience, but its public articulation. The stripping away of ambiguity. The way the room is instructed how to see him.

Then comes the Witnessing Turn.

“Mirelda Amaranthe,” The priestess intones, “Present.”

Mirelda turns slowly in place. She presents herself to each gallery in sequence, posture unyielding. The act is meant as an acknowledgement of her being continuity. She feels the weight of the audience’s attention without reacting to it. She has been trained for this since childhood.

When she faces forward again, the priestess nods once.

“Rhalin Amaranthe. Present.”

Rhalin rises and turns.

The scrutiny sharpens immediately.

Eyes rake over him, measuring youth, build, and compliance. Some women smile faintly. Others frown. A few whisper behind gloved hands. He feels it. Mirelda sees the way his shoulders draw inward despite his discipline, the way he must actively resist the instinct to shrink. A quick glance reveals Corin has averted his gaze.

Corin does not look up.

When the turn is complete, the Preceptor-General lifts her staff.

“Proceed to vows.”

Rhalin faces Mirelda.

“Rhalin Amaranthe,” The priestess says, “You will speak.”

He swallows.

“I—” His voice catches, just for a breath. A tightening moves through the crowd. Men falter sometimes. It is expected.

He steadies himself.

“I, Rhalin,” He says, slower now, careful, “Do vow myself into House Amaranthe. I vow obedience to my wife’s authority. I vow to uphold her name in word and conduct.”

Each phrase is placed with deliberate care, as though he is laying stones across water.

“I vow to accept her correction, her judgment, and her command as lawful and binding. I vow discretion where discretion preserves honour, silence where silence is required, and visibility only as befits her standing.”

His hands tremble now. Not enough to be seen by most. Enough for Mirelda.

“I vow to provide children in accordance with duty. I vow not to shame her household through want, refusal, or defiance.”

A breath.

“I vow myself hers,” He finishes quietly, “In law. In custom. Before the Covenant.”

The Preceptor-General inclines her head.

“Mirelda Amaranthe.”

Mirelda does not hesitate.

“I accept this vow. I claim this husband into my house. I vow provision, protection, and lawful standing. I vow not to diminish him publicly, nor discard him without cause recognized by the Covenant.”

A deliberate pause.

“I vow to keep my household intact.”

Nothing more. The restraint is noted and approved.

“Seal the vow.”

Mirelda has managed to avoid touching Rhalin in any manner that could be construed as affectionate thus far. She intends to keep it that way, to portray their marriage as a largely private one. But this is the point where touch is required.

Rhalin clearly knows that too. He is pale now, his breath shallow. He looks, Mirelda realizes, with something like dread.

There is no need to prolong it.

She lifts her chin slightly, steps forward, and brushes her lips to his. It is brief and perfunctory.

Rhalin exhales when she leans back, tension draining from him so visibly that a ripple of murmurs follows. His eyes lower immediately, relief written plainly across his face. The crowd will likely read this as shyness.

The staff strikes stone.

“By vow spoken and seal given,” The Preceptor-General declares, “This union stands.”

Applause rises, measured and proper. Bells sound once more, slower now, deeper.

The post-vow rites begin. A sash bearing the Amaranthe sigil is placed

over Rhalin's shoulders, knotted at his side, tight enough to be felt. He does not flinch. Then the ledger is brought forward. Mirelda signs first. Rhalin follows, his hand unsteady but obedient.

Celith signs last, her approval sharp and unmistakable.

As the ritual concludes, Mirelda allows herself one final glance toward the attendants.

Corin stands rigid, jaw tight.

She meets his gaze, and she does not look away.

The marriage proceeds.

And the world accepts it.

The door closes with a soft, final sound.

Mirelda sighs heavily. All the ceremony and celebration following the formality of their vows has left her exhausted. Now, back in the main house, noise still echoes from the fields and all the way back to the chapel.

The bridal chamber is vast without being indulgent. Stone walls softened by layered tapestries depicting conquests and land charters rather than lovers or saints. A wide hearth sits cold for the season, its

mantle carved with sigils of lineage rather than ornament. The bed dominates the center of the space, raised on a low dais, its posts thick and squared, the linens immaculate and untouched.

Rhalin stands just inside the door, hands folded and clearly nervous given what they are expected to do tonight. The sash has been removed, folded carefully and set aside. Without it, he looks smaller. Younger. The white of his ceremonial clothing almost glows against the darker stone.

Mirelda removes her gloves first, setting them on the sideboard. Then the pins from her hair, one by one, the tension easing from her shoulders as the weight of the day finally loosens its grip. She does not look at him when she speaks.

“You may sit.”

He startles, then obeys immediately, perching on the edge of one of the carved chairs near the hearth. His hands twist together before he stills them. Mirelda turns at last, studying him with the same frank assessment she gives a ledger or a field map.

“The household expects noise tonight,” She says evenly, “At least the implication of it. That expectation will be satisfied whether or not anything occurs.”

Rhalin’s breath catches.

She continues, calmly, “I do not expect anything from you tonight. Or tomorrow. Or this week.”

His head lifts, eyes wide, disbelief flickering across his face before he can suppress it.

“I’m in no hurry for children,” She adds, “We have time. Appearances allow for it. You are not required to touch me.”

The words land heavily between them. Rhalin swallows. His voice, when it comes, is unsteady but earnest.

“Thank you.”

Mirelda moves to the window, pushing the heavy curtain aside a fraction to let in the faint glow of torchlight from the courtyard below. Somewhere distant, the last of the wedding revelers are still drinking, still congratulating one another on a union that feels complete to them.

She speaks again without turning.

“There is something else you should know.”

She hears him catch his breath.

“This room,” She says, almost casually, “And several others in this wing, are threaded with old passages. They are not servant corridors, and very few know of their existence. Some were built during the first expansion, some earlier, when my ancestors feared a peasant rebellion. The passages do not appear on modern plans.”

Now she does turn, watching him carefully.

“They are narrow. Quiet. They open behind tapestries, through cupboards, beneath stair risers. They connect to select rooms. Storage chambers.”

Understanding dawns slowly on Rhalin’s face, then all at once.

“If you,” Mirelda continues, her tone dry, “Or Corin should ever require privacy… Or time unobserved...” A faint lift of her brow, “Those passages exist to serve the house. Use them accordingly.”

Rhalin does not speak for a while. His eyes shine in a way that has nothing to do with fear now. He rises from the chair, then stops himself, catching the breach in etiquette and bowing his head instead.

“I—” His voice breaks. He clears his throat and tries again, “I don’t know how to thank you properly.”

“You needn’t,” Mirelda says, “This arrangement benefits us both.”

She studies him as he stands there— He is still but no longer braced for impact. His breathing has slowed. The rigid line of his spine has softened into something closer to rest. He hesitates, then speaks again, carefully, as though testing the floor before stepping.

“My brothers,” He says quietly, “They… this marriage. It will reflect on them. Positively.”

Mirelda does not respond at once. She does not ask how many there are, nor their ages, nor their prospects. She does not invite elaboration. Brothers are an abstraction to her. Mere units of relation, not persons.

“I know opportunities are… difficult to secure,” Rhalin continues, his voice steadier now, “Without sponsorship. Without a name willing to stand behind you.”

There is no accusation in it. Just something like gratitude.

“Any patronage extended will be conditional,” Mirelda says, “And revocable.”

“Yes. Of course.”

“A husband with obligations beyond himself is less likely to act foolishly,” She adds after a beat, “That is all.”

Rhalin bows his head. The movement is instinctive, but the feeling beneath it is not fear this time.

“Still,” He says, softly, “I’m grateful.”

She does not correct him. She does not acknowledge the word. Instead, she says, quieter than before, “You will give the world what it expects to see. I will ensure it does not look too closely.”

He nods, quick and fervent, “I will. I swear it.”

And she believes him. She notes how his hands no longer tremble. Mirelda unfastens the outer layer of her gown, laying it neatly across the foot of the bed. She does not offer him help, nor does she expect him to offer it in return.

“You may take the smaller bed tonight,” She says, indicating the cushioned daybed set into the alcove near the shelves, “Or the chair, if you prefer. I do not care.”

He moves immediately toward the daybed, grateful for the instruction.

As he settles there, carefully arranging himself so as not to crease the fabric, she hears it, the quiet, involuntary sound he makes. The release of pressure that has been building for months, perhaps years.

“Thank you,” He says again, softer now.

Mirelda pauses, as if something has only just occurred to her.

“Oh,” She says mildly, “I nearly forgot. I had Corin assigned to a nearby room for the night. Officially, as an attendant on call. Unofficially—” A small, deliberate shrug, “His quarters connect to this wing.” She crosses to the north wall and lifts the corner of a tapestry just enough to reveal the faint outline of a narrow door worked seamlessly into the stone, “That passage leads to a service corridor behind the linen presses. It is soundless if used correctly. Perhaps you would actually prefer his room over the daybed.”

Rhalin stares at the revealed seam, then at her, something dangerously close to awe crossing his face. Mirelda then extinguishes the last lamp and settles herself into bed without ceremony. In the darkness, she

hears him move from the daybed and to the passageway, soft footsteps, the whisper of fabric, the careful press of fingers testing stone.

A faint click follows, almost imagined. Then the quiet rush of displaced air as the passage opens and closes again, swallowing him whole. Mirelda exhales, slow and satisfied, and lets the night take her.

The first days of marriage pass without incident. They look, to any observer, precisely as they should.

That, Mirelda decides, is a success.

The household settles quickly into a new rhythm, as if the estate itself has accepted the adjustment and corrected for it. Servants learn when to address Rhalin as Lord Amaranthe and when to avert their eyes. The steward's ledger gains a new column. The seating arrangements at breakfast require only minor revision. No one missteps badly enough to require correction.

Rhalin moves through it all with careful grace.

He rises early. Earlier than necessary, perhaps, but Mirelda does not remark on it. He takes his breakfasts lightly and never alone, always present when custom demands visibility. They attend sermons together. At dinners, Rhalin sits at her right hand and cuts her meat when she allows it. He refills her wine without being asked. When she rises, he rises. When she speaks, he stills. He learns the household's expectations quickly, adapting his pace to the estate's breathing as if he has always understood that a house, like a body, must be listened to before it can be directed.

When introduced formally as her husband, he bows just deeply enough. When spoken to, he answers precisely. When ignored, he does not attempt to reclaim attention.

Mirelda notes it with approval. By the third morning, she begins receiving compliments.

Not about the marriage itself— no one is so crude— but about Rhalin's comportment. His quiet usefulness. His lack of ostentation. He learns quickly which colours Mirelda prefers him to wear at court functions and which styles make him appear suitably subdued rather than childish. The gossip columns of the capital's circulars describe him as *"gentle," "well-bred,"* and *"pleasingly unobtrusive."*

Mirelda accepts each comment and does not challenge them.

She attends councils, inspections, and hunts as she always has. The estate does not change because she is married; if anything, it sharpens around her. The presence of a consort does not soften her authority, but it gives it a new frame. She is no longer merely the future of House Amaranthe. She is its present, established and sanctioned.

Rhalin does not share her bed, but no one notices that. When servants give them ample privacy, the passageways are used. Rhalin and Corin are as discreet as Mirelda expects them to be. The household and guards hear what they expect to hear through walls and doors at the appropriate hours. Mirelda ensures that expectation is met without ever needing to touch him.

When they pass in the corridors, he stops and waits for her to pass first. When she addresses him, he answers promptly and without familiarity. When she dismisses him, he goes.

Mirelda sees Rhalin relax more as the days go by.

He breathes more easily now. His shoulders no longer sit perpetually braced. The constant edge of fear has dulled into something quieter and more stable.

Corin keeps to the margins. Still speaks only when spoken to. His posture remains correct, his tone deferential. To anyone else, he is merely another capable servant fortunate enough to be attached to a consort rather than general labour. To Mirelda, he is a known quantity now.

Their first exchange after the wedding is brief and unremarkable.

She encounters him outside the greenhouse, kneeling to scrub soil from his hands before reentering the main house. He rises immediately at her approach, bowing low.

“My lady.”

“Corin,” She replies, evenly.

There is a pause.

He is clearly awaiting for a rebuke. For warning. For correction. He seems to know that she noticed him glaring at the wedding.

She doesn’t reprimand him.

“Your duties remain unchanged,” Mirelda says instead, “See that they continue to be performed with the same discretion.”

“Yes, my lady,” He answers immediately. His voice is tight, but steady.

She studies him for a moment longer than is strictly necessary. He meets her gaze this time, not with defiance, but with something more complicated. Calculation, perhaps. Or a reluctant acceptance.

Finally, he speaks again, carefully.

“The only reason he hasn’t run,” Corin says, low and controlled, “Is because of his brothers.”

The words hang between them. Mirelda does not ask for clarification. His brothers are not her concern. Whatever tether binds Rhalin to obedience existed long before her. She neither created it nor benefits from examining it too closely.

“Then ensure he has no reason to reconsider,” She says.

Corin bows again. Deeper this time.

“Yes, my lady.”

After that, something shifts. It feels like a truce.

Corin no longer glares at her when he thinks she is not looking. He watches her instead, alert and wary, as one might watch a storm that has already chosen its path. When she issues instructions regarding Rhalin's schedule or obligations, Corin listens closely. When she gives him access— quietly— to certain corridors, certain timings, certain absences, he takes them without comment.

He does not thank her. But he does not test her, either.

Rhalin spends his afternoons in the greenhouse.

This becomes quickly known.

It is harmless enough to invite no suspicion. The estate's greenhouse has long been underused, its collections uneven and poorly catalogued. He cleans the tables. Reorganizes the shelves. Repairs cracked frames. Pins specimens already dead, never disturbing the living.

Mirelda observes him there once, from the doorway.

He is seated at a long table, sleeves rolled carefully to avoid soil, hands steady as he works. His expression, usually so guarded, softens in concentration. There is reverence in the way he handles the moths, as if he understands something about fragility that others overlook.

Corin stands nearby, ostensibly cleaning tools.

They speak quietly. Not constantly. Not indulgently. But with ease.

At one point, Rhalin says something under his breath that makes Corin snort before he can stop himself. Rhalin glances up, startled, then smiles, something small and unguarded. It vanishes almost immediately when he remembers himself.

Mirelda turns away before she is noticed. She has seen enough.

That evening, Rhalin presents her with a small tray of tea after supper. The blend is unfamiliar, floral without being sweet.

“I thought you might prefer this,” He says, eyes lowered, “If not, I will not prepare it again.”

She tastes it.

“It will do,” She replies.

Later, she finds a neatly labeled specimen case placed on her desk without comment. Inside, a single moth, wings pale and veined like fine parchment.

She does not remark on it. She does not remove it, either.

The days continue.

From the outside, the marriage functions.

From within, it settles into something quieter and more brittle.

Mirelda keeps the structure intact. Rhalin learns to inhabit it without cutting himself on the edges. Corin moves through the spaces between them like a ghost, careful, loyal, and increasingly aware that this arrangement— cold, controlled, and unkind in its own way— is the closest thing to mercy they are likely to receive.

For now, it holds.

Chapter End Notes

> Since making highly stratified/gendered matriarchies my niche, I've wondered about homosexuality and how it would be realistically treated. I've fumbled around it before with the Gay Sibling, but now I want to give it more attention. Part 2 will explore more of their "marriage" and whatnot. Before anyone asks, it will not evolve into a polyamorous relationship. It'll also be Sad.

Chapter 17: Side Story: The Lady (Part 2)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Months later, the arrangement still holds.

That, Mirelda has learned, is no small thing.

Servants now address him correctly without correction. Guests accept his presence as inevitable rather than novel. His name appears on correspondence where it ought to, his seal appended beneath hers when custom requires it. When Hearthurn occurs, he creates a lovely tart for her, though she doesn't miss how he creates another one when granted more privacy… This one he takes greater care in making, and gifts it to Corin when the rest of the house sleeps.

The estate breathes with him now, rather than around him.

He has become— Useful. More than that, competent.

Rhalin takes to the management of domestic spaces with a quiet confidence that surprises even those inclined to underestimate him. He reorganizes the lower parlours to improve traffic during gatherings. He refines tea service so that guests are offered something appropriate before they realize they are thirsty. He hosts small salons that are tasteful, restrained, and well-curated affairs that encourage conversation without permitting excess. Mirelda attends one, once, long enough to be seen and to signal approval. After that, she leaves him to it.

It is not lost on her that, around the same time, three younger Avenleigh men find their paths subtly eased. One is apprenticed under a textile factor with Amaranthe ties, set to learn the management of looms, dyes, and household accounts. Useful work, respectable for a man, and unlikely to place him under anyone's heel too sharply. Another is recommended, without comment, to a provincial men's college that instructs in domestic administration, calligraphy, and estate etiquette. It's a finishing academy of sorts, one that produces prized household men and will widen his future prospects when it comes to marriage. The third is placed as a junior assistant in a border household allied to Amaranthe interests, a quiet position that offers food, shelter, and the promise of gradual advancement if he proves tractable.

None of these arrangements are discussed aloud. No letters pass through Mirelda's hands that name them directly. The patronage is diffuse, routed through favours owed and obligations quietly called in, just enough that no single thread can be traced back to her.

But Rhalin grows more settled in the weeks that follow. He is more willing to play the attentive husband when required, more meticulous in his execution of public duties, more precise in his adherence to expectation. Gratitude sharpens his focus. It does not soften his boundaries. He never seeks her affection, and she never offers it.

The gossip that reaches her continues to be favourable.

"He is gentle," They say. *"Attentive."* A credit to her household. No one suggests impropriety. No one dares suggest dissatisfaction. And Corin remains where he has always been, just behind Rhalin's shoulder, just out of notice.

But now, when Mirelda gives instructions that involve both of them, there is no longer that brittle pause of early days. Corin listens without bristling. Rhalin no longer looks as though he expects to be punished for existing. The tension between them has eased into

something workable.

On one occasion, Mirelda finds herself *laughing*. It happens in the library.

She has come to review a shipment of ledgers from the southern estates when she hears voices that are too animated and too unguarded. She pauses at the threshold, already assembling the necessary reprimand. Inside, Rhalin stands on a low stool, attempting to adjust a hanging lamp. Corin stands below him, hands half-raised, offering commentary that is distinctly unhelpful.

“If you lean any farther, you’ll fall,” Corin says.

“I am not leaning,” Rhalin replies, “I am compensating.”

“You’re compensating into empty air.”

“Then why are you not catching me?”

“Because you told me not to touch you in public spaces.”

“That was weeks ago.”

“And you meant it.”

Rhalin huffs. The lamp wobbles dangerously.

“Corin.”

“Yes?”

“Stop narrating my death and hand me the wrench.”

There is a moment, one careless and indiscreet moment, where Corin reaches up and steadies Rhalin by the waist. His hand settles there with instinctive familiarity, thumb pressing lightly into the small of Rhalin’s back, close enough that Rhalin exhales and leans into the contact without thinking. It is brief, but unguarded. Intimate in the way of people who forget themselves around one another.

Mirelda clears her throat.

The effect is immediate and spectacular.

Rhalin startles, loses his balance, and very nearly falls anyway. Corin catches him properly this time, grip tightening, arm braced across Rhalin’s back and ribs, holding him far closer than propriety allows, but just long enough to ensure he is steady, just long enough to remember what it is to hold him openly. Then Corin releases him as if burned, stepping back too quickly with hands clenched at his sides.

They turn toward her in unison. Rhalin’s face has gone crimson, colour blooming all the way to his ears. He looks mortified, though not frightened, caught rather than condemned. Corin, by contrast, looks as though he has just been handed a death sentence and is bracing for its delivery.

Mirelda takes in the scene— the stool, the crooked lamp, the incriminating proximity— with the same calm she applies to any logistical error.

“You have ten seconds,” She says evenly, “To explain why my library is attempting to kill my husband.”

Rhalin opens his mouth. Closes it. Then he tries again.

“I misjudged the height,” He says.

Corin quickly adds, “And the lamp is improperly weighted.”

Mirelda raises an eyebrow.

“And the touching?”

Silence. Rhalin’s shoulders slump.

“Habit,” He admits quietly.

Corin bows deeply, “Carelessness, my lady.”

Mirelda studies them for a long moment. Then she sighs.

“Let a footwoman fix the lamp. Men shouldn’t be doing something so

dangerous," She deadpans, "And remember where you are."

"Yes, Mirelda," Rhalin answers, having been expected to drop the 'Lady' title following their marriage, while Corin replies, "Yes, my lady."

She turns to leave, then pauses at the door.

"And Corin," She adds without looking back, "If he falls and breaks his neck, I will hold you personally responsible."

"Yes, my lady," Corin says fervently.

Behind her, she hears Rhalin let out a breath that is perilously close to laughter.

In the end, the incident does not spread.

The lamp is repaired that afternoon by a footwoman with a ladder and a scowl, and the library returns to its proper state. The stool is removed. Rhalin does not stand on furniture again. Corin does not touch him in public spaces, not even by accident. They learn quickly. If anything, the correction settles them.

The days that follow return to their rhythm, one that is faintly peculiar if one looks too closely, but it is quiet and efficient. Rhalin resumes his management of the house with renewed care. He hosts a small salon a week later, themed loosely around winter preservation and household economies. Mirelda attends just long enough to be seen taking tea at his side, nodding once at a well-placed remark, then withdraws to her study.

It is during this salon that the second mistake occurs.

A visiting noblewoman— minor and eager— arrives with her husband, a man whose breeding is sound but whose restraint is less so. He watches Rhalin throughout the evening with open curiosity, his gaze lingering not on the furnishings or the conversation, but on the way Corin anticipates Rhalin's needs. The refilling of cups. The quiet placement of a shawl when the room cools. The way Rhalin inclines his head toward Corin without looking, a subtle cue learned long before this house.

When the husband finally speaks, it is with a laugh meant to be genial.

"You keep your man very well trained," He says to Rhalin, nodding toward Corin, "One would think he anticipates your thoughts."

The room stills, only for a heartbeat, but enough. Rhalin's smile tightens. Corin freezes, hand halfway to the teapot. Mirelda, informed later by a footwoman with excellent instincts and a sense for danger, does not hesitate. She rejoins the salon within minutes, crossing the room with measured ease. She places herself beside Rhalin, her presence redirecting attention as cleanly as a drawn curtain.

"My husband values competence," She says mildly, addressing the noblewoman rather than her husband when the conversation continues, "House Amaranthe encourages it in all staff."

Her gaze flicks briefly and sharply to the man.

"And we do not remark upon it as novelty."

The implication lands. The husband flushes, murmurs an apology that is not quite sincere but sufficient. Conversation resumes along safer lines. By the time the guests depart, no one remembers the comment clearly enough to repeat it.

Later, when Mirelda passes through the domestic wing, she finds Corin standing very straight.

“Thank you, my lady.”

“See that it does not happen again,” She replies.

“It won’t,” He says. Then, after a beat, with a voice and expression dry as dust, “I will endeavour to anticipate fewer thoughts.”

She regards him. Despite her better judgement, the corner of her mouth twitches in wry amusement. Rhalin does not speak of it. He does not need to.

Instead, in the weeks that follow, Mirelda notices small things.

She notices how Rhalin embroiders in the evenings, seated near the fire with careful posture, his needlework precise and elegant. He favours moths and night insects— Creatures rendered in muted silks, wings patterned with mathematical care. It is work that would be dismissed as idle in many houses, but here it becomes decor. His pieces begin to appear framed in guest rooms and corridors, tasteful and subdued.

Corin often sits nearby, ostensibly reviewing household lists or polishing fittings, but his attention drifts. He watches Rhalin's hands with an intensity that borders on reverent. Sometimes he comments, blunt and practical.

"That stitch will pucker if you pull it any tighter."

Rhalin snorts softly, "You said that last time."

"And I was right."

"You always think you are."

Corin considers, "Statistically, yes."

Their affection remains quiet. A shared glance. A murmured exchange in passing. Once, when they think themselves unobserved by her, Corin reaches out and smooths a loose thread at Rhalin's cuff, his touch fleeting but intimate in its familiarity.

Mirelda does not comment. There are small moments, she thinks, she can allow them to have. While she expects discretion, she does not want to suffocate either of them.

She learns, piecemeal, things about their past without ever asking.

That when Corin came to Avenleigh as a boy, he was seconded from a smaller holding when his own family could no longer support him. That he learned early how to be useful, how to stand behind and

slightly to the side, how to endure. That Rhalin, younger then, learned embroidery from an uncle who believed boys should have something quiet to hold onto. That the two of them spent long winters in side rooms, Rhalin stitching by lamplight while Corin read aloud— Account books, sermons, anything to pass the hours.

That when Rhalin was first told he would be married, it was Corin who packed his folio. Mirelda never confirms any of this.

She simply allows the space for it to exist.

Dawn is only just breaking when Mirelda steps into the lower courtyard, the stones still damp with night. The air smells of cold earth and horse sweat, the faint metallic tang of harness fittings. Two carriages wait beneath the arch, one bearing the sigil of House Amaranthe, the other unmarked but familiar— Celith's.

Celith herself is already seated inside, a shadow behind drawn curtains, no doubt reading or pretending to. She never wastes time on farewells. Rhalin stands at the foot of the steps, wrapped in a modest cloak. Corin lingers a half-step behind him, hands folded and eyes lowered. Both of them look too awake for dawn, as though neither slept much.

Mirelda pauses with one boot on the carriage step.

She turns back, and Rhalin meets her gaze. Corin stiffens slightly, then steadies himself.

"I'll be gone for a month," Mirelda says evenly, "Council matters.

Inspections.”

Rhalin inclines his head, “Safe travels, Mirelda.”

She considers him for a beat longer, then lets her gaze flick briefly to Corin.

“You’ll be alone for some time,” She continues, “I imagine you will enjoy yourself.”

The words are dry, almost idle. The glance is not. Rhalin’s ears colour instantly. Corin goes scarlet, his composure shattering in a way that would have been unthinkable months ago. He ducks his head, mortified, then realizes too late that the reaction itself has given him away.

Mirelda’s mouth curves. She would never dream of such a quip normally, but it’s early enough in the morning and no one in earshot. She supposes she can allow herself a little entertainment… Though a part of her is still surprised at allowing herself something so serendipitous.

“Discreetly,” She adds, mildly.

“Y-Yes…,” Rhalin says, voice a touch too quick.

Corin manages a strangled, “Of course.”

Mirelda nods, satisfied. She does not linger. She steps into the

carriage, the door closing behind her with a decisive thud. As the wheels begin to roll, she allows herself another brief indulgence— An oddly warm thought..

They will be fine.

The thought settles more firmly than she expects. It sits in her head unexamined, as the carriage clears the gate and the estate disappears behind stone and mist.

She expects silence for the month.

Instead, three days into her travels, a letter is placed atop her morning documents, sealed neatly, the wax unadorned save for the household mark. It is not heavy enough to contain urgency, nor thin enough to be perfunctory. The script is careful, almost formal, the spacing precise to the point of restraint.

Rhalin's hand.

Mirelda breaks the seal.

Mirelda,

It would be too strange if a husband didn't write his wife, wouldn't it? So, I write to confirm the household remains in good order. The north parlour rugs have been aired. The winter preserves have been inventoried and found satisfactory, though the quince paste will require attention before first frost.

Corin sends no message, as he has none that would be appropriate to

convey.

I trust your journey proceeds without incident.

—R.A.

Mirelda exhales softly through her nose. She folds the letter once, then again, and sets it beside her plate. Celith, seated opposite her with her cane resting against the table, watches over the rim of her teacup.

“Well?” Celith asks.

“Nothing of note,” Mirelda replies.

“That in itself is notable.”

Mirelda does not argue. Instead, she reaches for her stylus and draws a sheet of paper toward her. Her reply is brief, as is expected.

Your report is received. See that the quince paste is addressed. Attend to the matter of the west servants’ rota with the Housekeeper-General before it becomes disorderly. I anticipate no difficulties.

She signs it with the household seal, then pauses. After a moment’s consideration, she adds one final line.

Do not allow boredom to breed carelessness.

Celith watches the stylus move, her expression unreadable.

“You are diligent. Most women would let a husband’s letter wait.”

“Habit,” Mirelda replies, “If I do not answer promptly, he will assume delay signals permission.”

Celith huffs, amused, “You train him carefully.”

Mirelda sets the paper aside to dry, “I expect accuracy. Nothing more.”

Celith does not press. She rarely does when the answer satisfies her.

The southern circuit is not ceremonial. There are inspections to conduct, accounts to reconcile, and three disputes between lesser houses that require her presence precisely because she is not inclined toward indulgence. Mirelda listens. She decides. She moves on.

Celith remains a constant presence, sharp-eyed and sparing with approval. Together they examine storehouses, question stewards, correct ledgers with surgical efficiency. Mirelda finds the rhythm familiar and grounding. Here, her authority is uncomplicated. Outcomes follow cause.

At night, in chambers that smell faintly of rosemary and old stone, Mirelda reads reports by lamplight. Sometimes, she thinks of the estate without quite meaning to.

She receives another letter a week later.

Mirelda,

Per your instruction, the west servants' rota has been amended. The overlap between scullery and linen duty has been corrected. No one has yet noticed, which I take as success.

I have hosted one salon in your absence. Attendance was appropriate. No remarks of note were made.

I trust the weather has been agreeable.

—R.A.

Mirelda's mouth twitches despite herself.

She replies that evening, after the day's meetings conclude.

Your definition of success aligns with mine.

Do not host additional salons without cause. Absence invites commentary.

The weather is irrelevant.

She hesitates, then adds:

You are performing adequately.

The word is chosen with care. Not praise. Recognition.

When the reply arrives, it is immediate enough to be telling.

I am glad to hear it.

Beneath the line, in the margin where no commentary belongs, he has drawn a small, meticulous sketch: A moth with absurdly exaggerated antennae, wings spread as though mid-lecture. It is neatly done, technically precise, and faintly ridiculous.

Mirelda exhales through her nose. She folds the letter away without comment.

The month passes with similar exchanges. Sometimes Rhalin includes details clearly meant to fill space: The state of the orchards, the embroidery he's been doing, the success of a tart recipe adjusted for a cooler oven. Once, he notes— almost casually— that Corin has taken to correcting the younger servant's posture *"with mixed results."*

Mirelda imagines it easily enough.

Her own work grows heavier as the circuit progresses. One inspection reveals misappropriated funds. Another uncovers a steward who has been quietly skimming grain allocations. Mirelda does not raise her voice. She removes her. The message travels ahead of her without effort.

At one provincial seat, a councilwoman remarks that Mirelda is fortunate her husband is *"no distraction."*

Mirelda meets her gaze steadily.

“My household does not require distraction,” She says, “Only function.”

That night, Mirelda lies awake longer than she intends to. She is not unused to solitude, but she has taken lovers years before. Foreign men in the brothels, most often, whose accents and unfamiliar manners make them safe. They were satisfactory dalliances. There is no danger of attachment. She has never indulged frequently, but neither has she denied herself out of principle. She thinks, briefly, of the promise she made Rhalin. No lovers paraded. No affairs that become whispers.

Her word matters.

Still, the thought arises. Diescretion need not mean abstinence.

There are houses in the capital— High-class establishments where anonymity is a commodity. Where masks are worn and where one does not give a name, and is not asked for one. Where desire is contained, transactional, and leaves no residue.

Mirelda considers it. She does not decide.

Instead, she turns her thoughts back to work.

The final week of the circuit is the heaviest. Celith grows quieter, more inward. On the last night before their return, they sit together over a sparse supper.

“You are thinking of home,” Celith observes.

“I am thinking of efficiency,” Mirelda replies.

Celith hums, unconvinced.

“You have done well,” She says after a pause, “This arrangement.”

“It is holding,” Mirelda says.

“That is not the same thing.”

Mirelda does not respond. The two of them start their trek back to the estate the next morning. The estate comes into view under a pale afternoon sky after two day’s travel. Smoke curls from the chimneys in the familiar pattern. The gates open without delay.

Rhalin waits at the steps. He is not fidgeting. His posture is correct. But there is something different in the way he holds himself— An ease that has nothing to do with practice. He looks… settled.

Corin stands behind him, as always, his expression composed. If he looks more tired than usual, Mirelda attributes it to vigilance rather than indulgence.

She descends from the carriage. Rhalin bows, precise and graceful.

“Welcome home, Mirelda,” He says.

She studies him for half a second longer than necessary.

“You appear rested,” She remarks.

His mouth twitches before he can stop it.

“The house has been quiet,” He says.

Corin clears his throat. Mirelda nods once.

“See that it remains so,” She says, then steps past them into the house.

As she crosses the threshold, she catches the faintest detail she had not noticed at a distance: A mark, barely visible at the line of Rhalin’s collar, half-hidden by fabric and already fading. Not an injury. And certainly not an accident.

Rhalin is aware of it a breath too late. Corin is aware of it at once. Neither of them moves to explain, and Mirelda does not slow her stride.

Yes. They have rather enjoyed themselves.

And with that, Mirelda thinks about visiting those masked brothels again.

The household resumes around her as though it has merely been holding its breath.

Servants adjust to her presence with the efficiency of long habit. Doors open at the correct intervals. Reports appear where they should. Meals are served without excess. Mirelda notes the absence of strain immediately. The estate is not scrambling to impress her return. It is functioning.

That, she decides, is Rhalin's doing.

They pause in the winter gallery, where a series of moth specimens have been mounted along the far wall. The frames are simple, the labels precise. Mirelda stops despite herself.

"These are new," She says.

"Yes," Rhalin replies, "I thought the gallery could bear something… less martial."

The specimens are pale and delicate, wings pinned with care, each one arranged to display pattern rather than dominance. They soften the stone without diminishing it.

"They are acceptable," Mirelda says.

Rhalin inclines his head, pleased but not effusive.

That evening, he hosts a small supper in her honour. The guest list is

restrained: Two neighbouring matrons, one magistrate, and the husband of a minor house whose presence signals approval without inviting scrutiny.

Conversation turns, briefly, to household management. The magistrate remarks on the efficiency of Mirelda's servants, the smoothness with which courses are served.

"You keep a disciplined house," She says.

"I expect competence," Mirelda replies.

Rhalin inclines his head, "Clear expectations simplify matters."

Corin, pouring wine, adjusts his grip minutely when Rhalin speaks, aligning himself without looking. The magistrate notices nothing. Mirelda notices everything.

As the days pass, Rhalin continues his work with growing assurance. His embroidery becomes more ambitious. He threads intricate river motifs worked in subtle shades that catch the light without demanding attention. He gifts one piece to Mirelda without ceremony, placing it on her desk as though it were merely another document.

She accepts it with a nod and later finds herself tracing the stitching absently while reading reports.

Later that night, Mirelda summons Rhalin to her study. He arrives promptly, as he always does, hands folded. The embroidery lies where he left it, aligned with her correspondence. She does not gesture to it immediately.

“Sit,” She says.

He does, carefully, on the edge of the chair opposite her desk.

“You managed well while I was away,” Mirelda says, “The household did not drift.”

“I am relieved to hear it,” Rhalin replies, “I made an effort to ensure it would not.”

“That was evident.”

She reaches for the embroidery, lifting it just enough to examine the reverse side.

“This work is finer. You have learned to stop pulling when the thread resists.”

Rhalin shrugs. Him shrugging would have been unthinkable in the early days of their marriage, “Trial and error.”

She sets the piece back down, “Corin remains efficient.”

“He does.”

“Good. He has been… quieter, since my return.”

Rhalin's mouth twitches, "He asked me to pass along a message."

Mirelda raises an eyebrow, "Did he."

"He said," Rhalin continues, voice carefully neutral though Mirelda can tell he is fighting back a grin, *"'Please inform the lady that nothing occurred in her absence that would have endangered the house, the reputation of its occupants, or the structural integrity of the furniture.'"*

Mirelda snorts before she can stop herself. Rhalin is grinning now.

Rhalin's restraint gives way, just slightly. His posture relaxes considerably.

"He also asked me to note that the chair in the east passageway was unsteady long before it became… relevant."

"Of course it was."

A pause settles between them.

"And?" Mirelda prompts.

Rhalin's gaze stays level, though the amusement fades into something warmer, more personal. One hand lifts, hesitates near where the mark on his neck is, then drops again.

“He wished it understood,” Rhalin says blithely, “That he has no intention of making a habit of damaging your furnishings.”

“See that he doesn’t,” Mirelda replies.

She leans back in her chair, and the absurdity arrives unbidden and fully formed.

My husband and his lover are breaking my furniture during intimacy.

The thought does not trouble her. It nearly amuses her.

“This arrangement continues to function in ways I did not originally model.”

Rhalin blinks, “Oh?”

“I am considering,” She says evenly, “Making use of certain… services, while I am in the capital. Quiet ones. Places where questions are neither asked nor answered.”

His eyes widen slightly, evidently surprised she had bothered to tell him at all, or perhaps he had expected that she wouldn’t ever take a temporary lover for herself for the duration of their marriage.

“I do not intend to advertise it,” She adds, “Nor invite commentary.”

Rhalin nods slowly, “I appreciate being informed.”

“That is all I am doing,” She says, “Informing.”

“If you do go… I would recommend the river quarter. The houses there tend to favour professionalism over curiosity.”

Mirelda regards him, “You speak from experience?”

He clears his throat, “Secondhand knowledge. Widely circulated.”

“Of course.”

“There is also,” He continues, emboldened just enough, “A general understanding among such men that silence is part of the service. It is considered… good manners.”

Mirelda inclines her head, “Then we are aligned.”

“If it helps, Corin would be relieved to know no one is being placed in an awkward position by comparison.”

“That is not my concern,” Mirelda says dryly, “But I am pleased his anxiety has been addressed regardless,” She straightens, “That will be all.”

Rhalin rises, bows, and turns to go.

At the door, she speaks again, “Rhalin.”

He stops.

“You have done what was asked of you,” Mirelda says, “Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“I understand.”

He leaves. Mirelda returns her attention to her papers. The lamp burns steadily. The house holds.

Later, as she smooths the embroidery once more before setting it aside, she thinks that Corin’s apparent concern for furniture, dry sarcasm aside, is almost touching.

The arrangement remains intact.

The rain is persistent.

It has been threatening since dawn, a low grey ceiling pressing against the estate, the kind of weather that soaks through wool eventually no matter how fine the cut. The hunting party gathers regardless. Covenant Day approaches, and with it the expectation of proof that the season has turned whether the sky agrees or not. Mirelda adjusts the fall of her cloak as she steps into the lower field. The grass is already slick beneath her boots. The air smells of wet leaves, iron, and animal musk. Hounds strain against their handlers, restless, ears

twitching at sounds only they can hear.

She takes stock with habitual precision.

Eight riders. Two visiting matrons. Celith, mounted and rigid as ever. A scattering of husbands, kept respectfully back for their tea under the terrace to protect them from the rain.

The women bid the men farewell, and the hunt moves out at a measured pace, hooves churning mud, rain stippling cloaks and saddle leather. Conversation is subdued at first, as it always is when weather asserts itself. Eventually, inevitability sets in. Voices rise.

“You timed this well,” says Lady Harrowin, a woman of sufficient standing that Mirelda listens, “The rain keeps the scent close to ground.”

“So I am told,” Mirelda replies.

Harrowin glances at her curiously, “It’s been a year.”

It is not a question.

Mirelda keeps her gaze forward, “It has.”

“And?” Harrowin presses lightly, “Is married life proving… productive?”

Celith makes a quiet sound of disapproval, but does not interrupt. This, Mirelda knows, is permitted ground. Inquiry masked as civility.

“My household functions. That is sufficient.”

Harrowin smiles, unfazed, “I meant no offence. Only— Covenant Day brings thoughts of continuity.”

“Does it,” Mirelda replies.

Harrowin laughs softly, “You know how it is. One begins to look ahead. Wonder what the next year will bring.”

Mirelda allows herself a glance sideways, brief and assessing, “And what do you hope it brings, my lady?”

Harrowin hesitates, then shrugs, “Children, I suppose. Or the absence of their lack.”

Celith exhales through her nose, “You are circling.”

“I am observing,” Harrowin counters, “As we all are.”

The rain thickens, softening edges and blurring the treeline. The hounds bay suddenly, a low ripple of sound that pulls attention away. Mirelda lifts one gloved hand, and the Hunting Marshal rein them in with practiced efficiency.

“My private affairs,” Mirelda says evenly, “Remain private.”

Harrowin inclines her head, “Of course. I only meant—”

“The marital bed is satisfactory,” Mirelda continues, “And it is not communal property.”

The line lands. Celith nods once, as if this confirms something she had already calculated, and the hunt resumes.

As they ride deeper into the wood, Mirelda’s thoughts drift despite her intention. She has always assumed this moment would come and pass without resistance. Marriage, duty, children. Sequence rather than sentiment. She had expected to approach it as she approaches most things: With resolve and an eye toward outcome. Entirely detached.

But detachment has proven… elusive.

Rhalin has not made himself invisible, as she expected he might. Nor has he asserted himself beyond his bounds. He exists, now, as a presence rather than an obligation. Competent. Considerate. Quietly exacting with himself. He embroiders well and when he hosts salons, the other husbands adore him.

That is the problem.

If he were careless, entitled, unthinking, this would be simple. A transaction, no more intimate than signing a ledger. She would endure it. He would comply. Children would follow. Instead, she finds herself aware of him as a person. A man with habits and loyalties. A man who has given her no cause to despise him.

Mirelda realizes, gradually, that she does not think of Rhalin as *hers* in the way society expects her to think of a husband. She does not see him as a possession, or a reflection of her power, or a conquest won through law and ritual.

She sees him as a person. The thought unsettles her.

In another life— another arrangement— she might have taken a husband attracted to women and folded him into herself completely, expected his desire, his obedience, his need. She would have owned that bond as proof of her authority.

With Rhalin, there is no such illusion.

He was never meant to want her. Never meant to be shaped by her body or her approval. And so she does not measure him by those standards.

She respects him.

The realization is uncomfortable, but she does not push it away.

The rain slicks down her cheek. She does not wipe it away.

Three children, minimum. She has always known that. An heir, at least one spare, and a third to bind alliances or hold in reserve. It is not cruel. It is responsible.

Still.

The hounds bay again, closer now. The Hunting Marshal signals. Tracks have been found and the party dismounts. The rain makes the forest close in, sound dampened, the world reduced to breath and wet earth. Mirelda takes her rifle from its sling and checks the action.

Celith steps close, “You are aware that questions will intensify.”

Mirelda does not look at her, “They always do.”

“A year is considered generous,” Celith continues, “Beyond that, speculation sharpens.”

“I am aware.”

Celith studies her profile, “Are you prepared?”

Mirelda tightens her grip on the stock, “For what, precisely?”

“For the consequences of success,” Celith says.

The words settle, heavy and precise.

“Yes,” Mirelda answers after a beat.

Celith does not press further. She steps back, giving Mirelda space as the Hunting Marshal signals again. A boar breaks cover suddenly, a dark, brutal shape bursting through underbrush slick with rain. It is larger than expected, shoulders thick, tusks curved and dangerous. One of the hounds yelps as it veers aside.

Time slows.

Mirelda lifts the rifle, breath steady and mind narrowing to trajectory and force. The boar charges, mud flying. She sights down the barrel.

In that instant, something tightens in her chest. An awareness.

This, she thinks, will change everything.

The shot cracks through the forest, sharp and final. The boar drops mid-stride, momentum carrying it forward before it collapses into the mud. Silence follows, broken only by rain and the distant rustle of disturbed leaves.

Mirelda lowers the rifle. Her pulse remains steady.

“Well struck,” Someone says behind her.

She nods once, already stepping forward to inspect the kill. The boar is dead. Clean and efficient. As all things should be. The hunt resumes its rhythm around her, voices rising again, the moment already folding into memory.

But something has shifted.

Mirelda stands over the fallen animal, rain soaking her cloak, and knows— with a clarity she does not welcome— that the path ahead is no longer abstract.

By the middle of Covenant Day, which is really a week, Mirelda is tired in a way that sleep does not resolve.

The sermons have followed one another with predictable regularity. Priestess Vaele's voice has filled the inner halls each morning and evening, calm and unadorned, repeating the same principles with slight variation. Order. Continuity. The sacred obligations of women, and the yielding service of men. Nothing novel. Nothing she has not heard before.

What has changed is the audience.

Minor houses have gathered in force this year. Their observances take place beyond Amaranthe's walls, in the outer courts and rain-darkened greens. From her windows Mirelda can see the movement of cloaks, the kneeling lines of men in soaked wool, the glint of basins carried from hand to hand. The foot washing is loud out there. Witnessed. Commented upon.

Inside, House Amaranthe keeps to its rank.

The observances here are contained, formal, and private by comparison. No crowds. No spectacle. Only the presence of those who must see and be seen. On the final day, the rain eases to a thin,

persistent mist. The gardens darken. The air smells of wet stone and incense.

The inner solar has been prepared for the rite.

A basin of warmed water stands at the centre of the room, faintly scented with herbs. Towels are folded precisely. Candles burn low along the walls. The windows are shuttered against the damp, leaving the space hushed and close.

Present are Priestess Vaele, Celith, Corin, and two matrons from allied houses. No more. No less. Servants wait beyond the doors, out of sight.

Mirelda enters first and takes her seat. Her boots rest before the basin. She folds her hands in her lap and stills herself.

Rhalin is brought in last.

He is dressed properly, in subdued colours suitable for the rite. His hair is bound back, his hands clean. He moves with practiced composure, but there is tension in his shoulders that Mirelda does not recall seeing during earlier observances.

He kneels when instructed.

The posture is correct. The placement of his hands is correct. He does not look up. Priestess Vaele speaks the opening invocation. Her voice carries easily in the enclosed space. Mirelda listens, her attention steady, her expression neutral.

When Vaele gestures, Rhalin reaches for Mirelda's boots. He removes them carefully, setting them aside. When he lifts her foot, his touch is firm and brief. He pours the water. He washes. He dries. Each movement is efficient and exact.

There is no flourish to it.

Mirelda is conscious of the room in a way she has not been in previous years. Of Celith's stillness. Of the matrons' measured attention. Of the priestess's gaze, not fixed on Rhalin, but on her.

When Rhalin switches to her other foot, his jaw tightens. The motion is small, easily missed. Mirelda does not miss it. She wonders how often he must've sat still, listening to Priestesses during sermons, hearing how a man's place is beneath a woman's heel. She had never really considered a man's perspective of such a thing, much less so the perspective of a man who desires the same sex.

She keeps her gaze forward.

The rite concludes without deviation. Priestess Vaele speaks the final words. Rhalin bows his head and remains kneeling until dismissed.

"It is observed," Priestess Vaele says.

Mirelda inclines her head. She offers no comment. None is required. Rhalin rises and steps back into place beside Corin, who has stood unobtrusively along the wall throughout. Corin's posture remains deferential, his expression carefully blank. He does not look at Rhalin.

Vaele offers a brief blessing and withdraws. The matrons follow, murmuring polite acknowledgements of Amaranthe's order and propriety. Celith lingers just long enough to ensure that nothing has gone awry.

"Well done," She says quietly, her eyes on the basin, "Precisely as expected."

Mirelda nods.

When the doors close behind them, the room empties of ceremony but not of its weight.

Rhalin exhales and straightens. He does not speak. He does not look toward Mirelda. Corin shifts his stance slightly, a habitual adjustment rather than a gesture.

Mirelda rises. The discomfort settles then, fully formed.

Not just at the ritual itself, as it's quite plain that both men have a great dislike for it. But for Mirelda, she feels the increasing weight of how visible everything has become. For a year, their arrangement has functioned within acceptable margins. Rhalin has filled the role required of him. The household has stabilized. Gossip has remained favourable. There has been no pressure she could not deflect with competence and silence.

Covenant Day strips away that buffer.

The sermons have sharpened the question without naming it. The rite has placed it at her feet, literal and symbolic. The watching eyes have

done the rest.

“Come with me,” She says as she moves towards a secret passageway. It is narrow and unlit save for the small oil lamp Mirelda takes, a leftover from the foot washing ceremony.

She does not summon them inside the house’s passageways often. The fact that she does now is seemingly reason enough for Rhalin to go still. Corin clocks it half a second later. His jaw tightens. His hand curls once at his side and stills.

Stone presses close on either side. The walls are old, uneven, built for secrecy rather than comfort. The air smells faintly of dust and oil.

Mirelda stops beneath a low arch and turns.

“Stand there,” She says.

They do. Rhalin exhales through his nose, a sharp sound that is not quite a laugh.

“Well,” He says, quietly, “I assume this is about the feet—”

“It is not,” Mirelda replies.

Her tone is flat. It leaves no room for wit. Whatever Rhalin was about to say dies on his tongue. He straightens, shoulders squaring, expression shuttering into something she recognizes too well: The

version of him that existed before the arrangement eased, before familiarity softened his edges.

Corin's eyes flick to Rhalin, then back to Mirelda. He says nothing. He is already bracing.

"I will be direct," Mirelda says, "Covenant Day has concluded. Expectations have shifted. They will not recede."

She pauses only long enough to ensure they are listening.

"It has been a year. The household will soon expect proof of continuity."

Rhalin's throat works. His hands clasp together in front of him, fingers tightening until the knuckles pale. Corin reacts faster.

"No," He says, sharply, before he can stop himself.

Mirelda's gaze snaps to him.

"That is not your place," She says.

He swallows, jaw set. "With respect—"

"I did not invite commentary. This is between myself and Rhalin but I am giving you the courtesy of informing you of what will occur next."

Silence drops, thick and brittle.

Rhalin mumbles then, “Continuity….”

“Yes,” Mirelda says, “Children.”

Mirelda feels the shift as keenly as they do. The distance returns, deliberate and necessary. Whatever fragile ease had grown between the three of them retracts at once, like a door closing on well-oiled hinges. She suspects— no, she knows— that the camaraderie they had been building will not survive this. This is a demand neither of them will forgive, not truly.

She accepts that before she speaks again.

“I intend to conceive,” She continues, feeling a pang of something in her chest she doesn’t quite know what to do with, so she ignores it, “I intend to bear children of my house. This is not negotiable.”

Corin’s breath hitches. He looks at Rhalin, then back at Mirelda, disbelief giving way to something sharper.

“You have other means,” He says quickly, colour draining from his face, “You’ve used them.”

Mirelda does not flinch.

“I have, but I will not continue.”

“Why,” Corin demands, heat breaking through his control, “When it would solve this without—” He cuts himself off, hands flexing, “Without dragging him into it.”

“Because I will not invite speculation,” Mirelda replies, “Because I will not give anyone cause to question my children’s legitimacy. Because men talk. Because women notice patterns. Because someone will count months and make claims.”

Her voice remains even. Her words do not soften.

“I will not risk it. Not for convenience. Not for sentiment.”

Rhalin’s gaze drops to the stone floor. For a moment, she thinks he will say nothing.

“I won’t—” He begins, then stops. He inhales, steadying himself, “I was glad to know you were visiting brothels. I had hoped they would do what was needed. I cannot… be what you expect.”

“I am aware,” Mirelda says, “Which is why I am not asking for that.”

Both men look up. She meets Rhalin’s gaze directly.

“You are not required to touch me. There will be no performance. No pretense.”

Corin's mouth opens, then closes. Mirelda continues, her tone turning clinical and precise.

"You will provide what is necessary into a vessel. I will see to the rest. There will be no shared bed," She pauses, then adds, because accuracy matters, "I merely require your consent and your seed."

Rhalin stares at her. Then— quiet, sharp, and entirely out of place— he lets out a sound that is perilously close to laughter. It is not amusement. It is disbelief, edged with something bitter.

"Consent," He repeats softly, "You're just saying that to make yourself feel better."

His mouth curves, just barely, in a way that does not reach his eyes. Mirelda holds his gaze. She does not correct him. She does not defend herself.

She remembers the marriage contract. The careful marginalia. The line she underlined twice.

Participation requires expressed consent at the time of engagement.

She had believed it mattered. She believes it still does. But belief does not erase imbalance. It never has.

Corin laughs once, harsh and incredulous, "You think that makes this better?"

“I think it makes it survivable,” Mirelda replies.

“For who?” Corin snaps.

She looks at him steadily, “For all of us.”

“No,” He says, a brittle edge creeping into his voice. His lips press together as if to hold something back, “For you.”

The accusation lands cleanly. Corin’s eyes are bright with anger, and he does not look away.

Mirelda does not deny it.

“This arrangement has always existed to serve my house. That has not changed.”

The words land heavier than she expects. Not because they are untrue, but because they are complete. There is no room left in them for the compromises she had quietly allowed herself to believe mattered.

Rhalin’s shoulders sag, just slightly. The ease he had gained over months drains from him in a way she cannot unsee. He folds inward, expression careful, distant, retreating to a version of himself she had hoped— foolishly— was no longer necessary.

“I understand,” He says quietly.

Corin turns on him, “Do you?”

Rhalin does not look at him.

Mirelda watches the fracture widen. She had anticipated this. She had prepared for it. That does not blunt the impact. It does not stop the sharp, unwelcome awareness that something fragile has just been broken by her own hand.

“I will cease visiting the brothels,” She adds, “For now. There will be no overlap. No confusion.”

Corin scoffs, “How generous.”

She steps closer— Not in anger, not in threat, but because retreat would feel dishonest. The lamplight throws sharp shadows across the stone, carving her face into planes she knows too well.

“You have been granted latitude that few men receive,” She says, a coldness edging into her voice, “You have lived comfortably. Safely. With one another.”

Rhalin flinches. Corin stiffens, his posture sharpening, as though the words have struck something tender and left it exposed.

“That does not exempt you from obligation. It never did.”

Corin's expression shifts into understanding of a different, colder sort. His jaw sets. The look he gives her is not one of confusion now, but recognition. *So much for consent,* it says. *So much for choice.*

The thought cuts more deeply than she expects. She does not soften the line or qualify it. Whatever she feels does not alter the truth of the imbalance between them. She holds power here. Pretending otherwise would be another kind of cruelty.

The silence that follows is colder than before, stripped of the easy tolerance they had built and replaced with something rigid and deliberate. Mirelda stands in it, unmoving, and accepts the cost.

"When," Rhalin asks at last, voice flat.

"Soon," Mirelda replies.

Corin's hands shake. He clenches them into fists.

"This is what it was always going to be," Mirelda says.

She hears the words as much for herself as for them.

"If you allowed yourself to forget that," She adds evenly, "It was a mistake."

And this time, she does not pretend she is untouched by the cost.

Covenant Day leaves a residue.

Not noise— though there is plenty of that— but pressure. A tightening that lingers in corridors long after the banners are taken down, after the prayers have been spoken and the public performances carefully concluded. It is a week that exists to remind everyone where they stand in relation to power, lineage, and obligation. Mirelda has always understood that.

The passageway conversation does its work precisely because Mirelda does not soften it. After that, something delicate breaks.

Not loudly. Not all at once. But the air between the three of them changes, acquiring an edge it did not have before.

Rhalin grows nervous again. The small, careful confidence he had begun to build erodes. His laughter disappears. He becomes more exacting with himself, more deferential, as though proximity alone might constitute a transgression. He stops bringing moth specimens and embroidery samples to Mirelda's study. Stops lingering in rooms where she is present unless required.

"This doesn't feel like a home anymore," She had heard him mutter once. It had stung more than she expected.

Corin, meanwhile, goes cold.

Not outwardly— never that— but in the way he answers Mirelda now with clipped precision rather than dry humour. Where once there had been a wry correction or a quietly pointed observation, there is now

only obedience stripped of texture. He keeps his eyes down more often. Positions himself farther from Rhalin in public spaces. When Mirelda speaks to him, he responds correctly and nothing more.

Mirelda, for her part, retreats.

She does not attempt reassurance. That would be indulgent, and worse, misleading. She becomes detached again, efficient, businesslike. The fragile camaraderie of the past months is allowed to wither without comment.

They do not speak of children again for weeks.

The household settles into an uneasy rhythm. Covenant Day passes into memory. Winter presses in. Fires burn longer. Meals are heavier. The estate turns inward. It is during this quiet, in the lull after obligation but before outcome, that the next step becomes unavoidable.

Mirelda summons Rhalin one evening, to a smaller adjoining room near her bedchamber, plainly furnished and used for medical examinations and private consultations. There is a fire lit low in the hearth. A small table has been cleared. Upon it rests a covered vessel of glazed ceramic, unadorned and practical.

Rhalin understands immediately.

His breath catches. He stills himself at once, posture snapping into place, hands folding neatly at his waist.

“Yes, Lady Mirelda,” he says, before she has even spoken, the title

Lady coming back to his vocabulary. He no longer calls her just by her name in private anymore.

She gestures for him to sit. She watches him carefully as he lowers himself onto the chair. He does not tremble. That surprises her. He looks… resolved, perhaps. Pale, certainly. But there is a steadiness there she has not seen before.

“I will not touch you,” She says, “This arrangement preserves your dignity and my objective. If at any point you cannot continue, you will say so.”

He nods once.

“Corin may be present,” Mirelda adds after a brief pause, “If you wish.”

The offer is not generosity. It is strategy. Rhalin’s compliance will be easier if he is not alone. Rhalin hesitates only a moment before answering.

“Yes. Please.”

Corin is sent for. When he enters and understands the purpose of the summons, something dark flickers across his face before he schools it away. His hands curl briefly at his sides. He bows to Mirelda with impeccable form.

“My lady.”

“Sit with him,” Mirelda says, indicating the chair beside Rhalin, “You are here as support.”

Corin inclines his head, as though he does not trust himself to speak.

He sits.

Rhalin reaches for him immediately, fingers catching at Corin’s sleeve before finding his hand. Their hands clasp tightly, knuckles whitening.

Mirelda turns away.

She gives them privacy without leaving the room, positioning herself by the table, her back partially turned. The fire crackles softly. The silence stretches, dense and unbearable. She does not watch.

What she hears instead are the small, human sounds of effort and restraint. Rhalin’s breathing, uneven at first, then carefully regulated. Corin’s low murmur, words too quiet to distinguish, pitched for Rhalin alone. A whispered reassurance, perhaps. Or a warning. Or both.

Time passes strangely.

When Rhalin finally speaks again, his voice is hoarse but steady.

“I’m… finished.”

Mirelda turns back.

The vessel is covered again, held carefully in Rhalin's hands as if it might shatter. He does not look at it. His gaze is fixed somewhere over Mirelda's shoulder, unfocused, as though he has removed himself from his body entirely.

"Set it down," She says.

He does so with meticulous care, aligning it squarely with the edge of the table. That small act of precision nearly undoes him; his breath stutters, and Corin tightens his grip just enough to anchor him.

Mirelda nods once.

"That will be sufficient for tonight."

She takes the vessel. There is nothing sacred about it. It is biological fact, nothing more. She covers it fully and moves it aside, already calculating timing, viability, next steps.

Rhalin remains seated. Corin does not move.

The silence after is different. Heavier. As though something irrevocable has been set in motion.

"You may go," Mirelda says finally, her voice returning to its usual calm but she finds an ache settling in her chest, her heartbeat growing louder in her ears, "Both of you."

Rhalin stands on unsteady legs. Corin rises with him, one hand immediately at Rhalin's elbow, steadying him without appearing to do so. They bow together and leave.

Once the door closes, the moment ceases to belong to her. That boundary matters. It is the difference between authority and intrusion, between governance and voyeurism. She has learned, over the years, that power exercised too closely becomes distorted. This is not the first decision she has made that will alter lives permanently. It is merely one of the quieter ones.

The fire burns low. She lets it.

That night, sleep comes poorly. Timing. Likelihood. The next necessary steps. She does not imagine outcomes she cannot control. There will be either success or repetition. If there is success, there will be further negotiations with flesh, time, and silence.

She does not wonder what Rhalin or Corin feel. She already knows.

The change continues to become visible within days.

On the surface, the men remain exemplary to the public. Underneath, there is strain that keeps growing wider.

What surprises her is how little Corin conceals it from Rhalin.

She observes them together in the margins of the household. Passing moments. Shared glances. Rhalin sometimes draws subtly away, not

from Corin himself, but from the intensity of his watchfulness.

It is the first sign of fracture.

They do not speak of the vessel again. Not in her presence, and she suspects not at all. Silence becomes the preferred medium. Silence, after all, has always been their shared skill.

Weeks pass.

Winter deepens. The estate settles into its quieter routines. Mirelda resumes her normal schedule, but she keeps careful track of her own body. Subtle changes. Absences. Signs that do not yet resolve into certainty.

She does not announce anything. There is nothing to announce.

One evening, she summons Rhalin again.

This time, he knows why before the messenger has finished speaking. He arrives pale but composed, bowing with a precision that borders on ritual. Corin accompanies him without being asked. Mirelda allows it.

They stand before her, the distance between them slightly wider than it used to be.

“We will need to repeat the process,” She says plainly.

Rhalin inhales slowly.

“Yes,” He says. There is no hesitation, though there is something about him that already appears exhausted. Corin’s jaw tightens.

Mirelda notices that Rhalin glances at him then, briefly. There is something unspoken in the look, something like apology.

That is when he surprises her.

“Lady Mirelda,” Rhalin says, “I would like to say something. If I may.”

She gestures for him to continue.

“I have… thought about this,” He says slowly. His voice is quiet, but it does not waver, “Not only since Covenant Day. Before. In other ways. I never spoke of it because it was… irrelevant.” He swallows, “But the idea of children was not unwelcome to me.”

Corin turns to him sharply. Rhalin does not look away.

“I know,” He continues, as if answering an accusation that has not yet been spoken, “I know it could never have been as we might have wished. But the wanting was there. Even so.”

The room is very still. Mirelda watches Corin’s face close, expression shuttering with an effort that borders on pain. This, she realizes, is

worse than resistance would have been. This is acceptance reframed as loss.

“I wanted to be a father,” Rhalin adds, not looking at Mirelda now, but speaking into the space between himself and Corin, “I just did not imagine it like this.”

There it is.

Mirelda does not interrupt when Rhalin continues.

“I am not saying this to protest. Only… so that it is said.”

Corin’s hands clench at his sides. He does not speak. He cannot. His silence is louder than anything he might have said.

“Thank you for your honesty,” Mirelda says at last. There is a sharpness in her exhale that nearly makes her breathless.

The second time is no easier.

It is quieter, perhaps. More efficient. The mechanics are familiar now. That does not lessen the weight. If anything, it sharpens it. Familiarity strips away the last illusions of exception.

Afterward, Corin does not touch Rhalin. He stands apart, rigid, his restraint now visibly strained. Rhalin notices. Of course he does. He hesitates, then reaches out anyway, fingers brushing Corin’s sleeve in a gesture that is tentative, almost childlike.

Corin steps away. The movement is small. Mirelda says nothing.

This is not a wound she can cauterize. Any attempt to soothe it would only deepen the resentment. Corin's anger is not misplaced, and she begins to feel the full guilt of it. She sees Corin begin to place himself deliberately outside moments that involve Mirelda and Rhalin together. She sees Rhalin hesitate before seeking Corin's counsel, as though unsure whether he is permitted to burden him with thoughts now deemed compromised.

She sees resentment settle into Corin like sediment.

He is not wrong to feel powerless. He *is* powerless.

That is the truth he has spent his life avoiding, and now it has been made explicit. Mirelda represents not merely authority, but inevitability. She does not need to threaten him. Her existence is threat enough.

One evening, as she reviews correspondence from House Amaranthe's stewards, she notes with interest the latest reports on Rhalin's brothers. Appointments secured. Patronage extended. Their positions are strengthening. Their futures stabilizing.

She considers mentioning it to him. She decides against it. It would only be a cruelty, as Rhalin already knows. That knowledge is part of what keeps him here, standing upright under pressure that would crush a less careful man.

And for the first time since her marriage began, Mirelda feels— not doubt— but something adjacent to it. A brief, unwelcome awareness

of the damage required to sustain the structures she governs.

It takes four more attempts.

Mirelda does not mark them ceremonially. She records dates, intervals, physical responses. Each attempt is conducted with the same controlled restraint as the first. There are no consolations offered, no reassurances beyond what is medically prudent. Repetition strips meaning from gesture and leaves only purpose.

With each unsuccessful attempt, the tension between the men tightens.

By the fifth attempt, Corin asks not to be present.

He does so carefully, requesting an alternate assignment for the evening, phrased as concern for Rhalin's composure rather than his own endurance. The lie is competent. Mirelda allows it. This, too, is a kind of mercy.

Rhalin does not protest.

That, perhaps, is the most troubling sign.

When Mirelda begins to suspect pregnancy, she does not permit herself relief. She has learned better than to trust hope or instinct. She waits for confirmation, for the body to declare itself beyond doubt. When it does, the knowledge settles into her with familiar weight.

This is done.

She sits with it longer than necessary, not because she is uncertain, but because this is the point at which a private compromise becomes permanent. Everything after this will be visible, measurable, undeniable.

“You are going to be a father,” She tells Rhalin when she summons him.

For a moment, he does not react at all. His face goes blank, as though the words have not yet resolved into meaning. Then something complex passes over his expression— Relief, grief, wonder, and fear layered so tightly Mirelda can almost see the strain of holding them all at once.

“I see,” He says finally.

She waits.

“I… thank you,” He adds, after a pause that stretches long enough to be dangerous. The gratitude is not for her. Mirelda understands that immediately. It is for the fact itself. For the child. For the realization of a want he had never fully permitted himself to name, and yet at the same time, she hears that understated fear of a man who knows his life has been upended again.

“I will make arrangements,” Mirelda continues, “Your brothers’ positions will remain unchanged. In fact, they will strengthen. This development secures their standing. You have done your duty to your natal house.”

Rhalin nods. His hands tremble once, then still. When he speaks again, his voice is controlled but altered, pitched lower, weighted. He inclines his head, seemingly accepting the truth of it. Obligation settles around him like armour, heavy but familiar. Whatever grief or fear he carries, it is now contained within a structure he understands.

“And Corin?” he asks quietly.

Mirelda meets his gaze.

“He remains,” She says, “I see no reason why his position would change.”

The relief on Rhalin’s face is immediate— And then complicated, twisting into something pained and uncertain.

“I don’t know how to tell him.”

But as the day goes by, Corin knows before he is told. Mirelda sees it in the way he stills when the change becomes visible— Subtle and small alterations in her routine, the careful way physicians are admitted after dusk, the quiet recalibration of the household’s attention. He has survived too long not to recognize the signs.

When she confirms it, he listens without interruption.

“I understand,” He says when she finishes.

She waits. He does not bow immediately. That, too, is a choice.

“I will continue my duties as before,” He adds, “Unless you instruct otherwise.”

“I will instruct otherwise if necessary. It is not, at present.”

Later— much later— Rhalin speaks to him.

Mirelda does not witness the conversation directly. She does not need to. The aftermath is enough. Rhalin emerges from their rooms subdued in a way that has nothing to do with fear. Corin does not avoid his duties, but something essential withdraws. The closeness they once carried carefully between them becomes brittle, replaced by a formal exactness that cuts deeper than distance.

From what Mirelda can infer, the breach is quiet and devastating.

Corin tells Rhalin, calmly, that he cannot watch him build a future that excludes him and still pretend it is survival rather than choice.

Rhalin does not deny wanting the child. That is where it breaks.

The wanting had once been abstract, safely impossible. Now it is real, embodied, unavoidable. He wants to be a father. He always has. That truth does not erase his love for Corin, but it does reorder it, pushing it into conflict with responsibility, legacy, and blood.

Corin’s resentment finally breaches containment days later, not in public, not in defiance, but in Mirelda’s presence.

She gives an instruction. A minor one. Something procedural.

Corin carries it out flawlessly. Then, before withdrawing, he speaks.

“My lady,” He says, voice level, “You should know that I will continue to serve with full competence. But I no longer consent to believing that this arrangement is merciful.”

Mirelda studies him for a moment.

“Noted,” She says.

That is all he wanted— And all he will receive.

The household adjusts again, settling into a new, harsher equilibrium. Corin remains at Rhalin’s side in title, if not in truth. Rhalin steps forward into fatherhood with a mixture of awe and grief that never quite resolves.

Mirelda watches it all with clear eyes.

The room Rhalin chooses for the nursery is on the eastern side of the house, where the light arrives early and stays longer than elsewhere. Mirelda notices this first, the way the windows catch the morning sun and hold it, warming the stone before the rest of the estate wakes.

She stands just inside the doorway while Rhalin explains.

“It’s quieter here,” He says, gesturing with careful enthusiasm, “The servants’ corridors don’t pass nearby, and the ceilings are lower. Less echo. I thought that might matter.”

Corin stands near the window, hands folded behind his back. He does not look at the room. He looks out. Mirelda continues to listen without interrupting.

“There’s enough space for a cradle and a nurse’s bed. And later—” He stops himself, glancing at Mirelda, “If later is appropriate.”

“It is appropriate to plan,” Mirelda says.

“Yes,” Rhalin says, a little chastened. Then, after a moment, “I thought the wood should be ash or birch. Something that doesn’t darken the room.”

He looks at Corin then, almost involuntarily, “You always knew how to make rooms feel… balanced… I wondered what you thought.”

Corin does not turn.

“I think that the room is well lit.”

The answer is not untrue. It is also not what was asked.

Rhalin's shoulders tighten, "That's not— I didn't mean—"

"I know what you meant," Corin says, still facing the window. His voice is level and uninflected, "And I am not the person you consult about this."

Mirelda steps farther into the room.

"Corin," She says calmly, "You are permitted to speak freely."

Corin turns at that, slowly. When he faces them, his expression is controlled but stripped bare of its usual politeness. Mirelda catches the twitch in his eye.

"I am speaking freely," He says.

Rhalin flinches, the words landing harder than any raised voice might have. Mirelda watches Rhalin absorb what isn't said out loud, watches the effort it takes for him not to retreat.

"I want to do this properly," He murmurs quietly, "I don't want the child to feel like an obligation. Or a solution. I want—" He stops, breath hitching, "I want to be glad."

For a moment, Corin's composure falters. Just barely. Something sharp flashes across his face before it is gone again.

"You're allowed to be glad. That doesn't require my participation."

Mirelda intervenes before the moment can fracture further.

“The nursery will be furnished. Other servants will see to it. Corin is not obligated to assist.”

She looks at Corin directly.

“Your refusal is accepted.”

“…Thank you, my lady,” He says stiffly.

Rhalin swallows.

“I didn’t mean to pressure you,” He says to Corin, “I just thought—”

“That thinking is the problem. You are moving forward. I am standing still. Do not ask me to pretend that is not what’s happening.”

Silence fills the room, thick and uncomfortable. Mirelda turns away first.

“Proceed,” She says to Rhalin, “I expect the room ready before the next household inspection.”

“Yes, Lady Mirelda,” He answers, face dejected.

As they leave, Mirelda notes the way Rhalin lingers for half a heartbeat, as though hoping Corin will follow. He does not.

Mirelda's pregnancy becomes impossible to ignore by midwinter.

House Amaranthe does not announce early, but it does not conceal success either. The physicians come openly now. Servants adjust their movements around her without being instructed to do so. Chairs appear where she is accustomed to standing. Doors are opened a moment sooner than necessary. The household learns the shape of her condition by instinct.

Mirelda can feel Rhalin watching her more often, eyes tracking small changes: The way she tires earlier in the evening, the way her hand rests unconsciously at her abdomen when she thinks no one is looking. She is not foolish enough to think he is growing any sort of care for her. He is merely interested in the child growing inside her. She permits it. It costs her nothing and it steadies him.

Corin notices it too.

He says nothing.

The nursery takes shape. Carpenters work quietly and efficiently. The wood is pale, the lines simple. No excess. Mirelda approves the choices without comment. Rhalin oversees the work with a seriousness that borders on reverence. He spends long stretches in the room alone, sometimes standing uselessly in the centre of it, as though waiting for instructions no one has given him.

Mirelda encounters him there one afternoon.

He startles slightly when he realizes he is not alone.

“Ah—” He starts, bowing awkwardly, as if the room itself has unbalanced him, “I didn’t hear you.”

“I was not attempting to be heard.”

He straightens, smoothing his hands down the front of his coat. The gesture is unnecessary. He looks… different. Not lighter, exactly, but more resolved. As though he has chosen a direction and is now forcing himself to walk it.

“The cradle arrives tomorrow,” He says, “The carpenter assures me it’s solid. Nothing decorative. Just… sound.”

“That is sufficient,” Mirelda says.

He hesitates.

“I’ve been reading,” He adds, then winces faintly, as if embarrassed by the admission, “House records. Old letters. About children. About how they’re… raised here.”

Mirelda regards him for a moment.

“And?”

“There’s a great deal about discipline… Less about gentleness.”

“Gentleness is assumed, especially from their father,” Mirelda replies, “It does not require documentation.”

Rhalin nods, absorbing that, “I would like to be… present. For the child. Not just formally.”

“You will be. I see no reason for you to not be an attentive father should you wish to become one.”

He smiles then, just briefly, “I’m hoping the estate can feel like a home to me again.”

That evening, he seeks Corin out again.

Mirelda is not present for the beginning of the conversation, but she becomes aware of it when voices carry faintly through the adjoining corridor. Not raised. Not sharp. Just… strained.

“I’m not asking you to help,” Rhalin says, “I’m asking you to see it.”

Corin answers quietly, “I see it every day.”

“That’s not what I mean. I need you to understand that this doesn’t erase what we were. It doesn’t—”

Corin laughs once, sharply.

“What we were depended on impossibility. It was survivable because it had no future. You have one now.”

A pause. When Rhalin speaks again, his voice is tight and strained.

“I didn’t choose this to hurt you.”

“I know. That’s what makes it worse.”

And still, Rhalin moves forward.

He oversees the nursery. He memorizes schedules. He asks the physicians questions, listens carefully to answers he does not fully understand. One evening, when they are standing in the nursery, he mumbles something Mirelda doesn’t think she’s meant to hear.

“I’ll do better,” He says, “I’ll try.”

Corin stands outside in the corridor.

He does not enter.

Mirelda learns the rhythms of pregnancy as she has learned everything else: By observation, adjustment, and endurance.

House Amaranthe treats her condition as a matter of state. Schedules shift. Council meetings shorten. Physicians attend her with a deference that borders on reverence, and Celith watches her closely. Every symptom is recorded, discussed, contextualized against family history and precedent. Her body becomes a site of interest. She tolerates this.

She has been raised to understand that her body has never been solely her own.

What surprises her is not the physical changes, but the way time behaves. Days elongate. Small discomforts acquire significance. She becomes acutely aware of stillness, of moments where she pauses without meaning to, hand resting at her abdomen, as if listening for something.

The child moves. The first time it happens, she is alone.

It is not dramatic. Just a faint, internal shift, a sensation like pressure rather than motion. She stills immediately, breath caught, mind narrowing to the singular fact of it. Something is there. Something living.

She closes her eyes and acknowledges it, the way one acknowledges a fact that cannot be undone. She tells Rhalin before she tells Celith. When she does, he freezes.

“You’re certain?” He asks, voice barely above a whisper.

“Yes.”

He presses a hand flat against his chest, as though steadying himself. He looks entirely unmoored, then something settles into place, and his expression changes, not into joy exactly, but into gravity.

“I’m glad,” Rhalin says carefully, “That you told me.”

Mirelda nods.

Corin stands nearby, silent. His eyes flick once to Mirelda’s abdomen, then away again. She does not invite him to touch her stomach. She does not forbid it either. He does not ask.

Celith watches all of this without comment. She has taken a seat near the wall, her cane resting across her knees, posture straight despite the hour. Her eyes miss very little. She says nothing, but Mirelda is aware of her presence the way one is aware of a supporting beam—Unobtrusive and essential.

As the months pass, Mirelda’s body alters in ways that cannot be disguised by posture or tailoring. Her centre of balance shifts. Breath shortens under exertion. There is pressure where there was once none, an insistence that does not yield to discipline.

The child grows.

Physicians visit regularly, their hands warm and professional, their voices cautious but increasingly optimistic. There are no outward signs of weakness. The heartbeat is steady. Movement is consistent. Mirelda’s health remains strong. Celith listens to the reports with her head inclined, fingers resting lightly on her cane. When one physician grows too optimistic, Celith clears her throat once, sharply, and the woman recalibrates immediately.

The household relaxes into the assumption of continuation.

Rhalin allows himself to hope.

Mirelda notices it in small, almost incidental ways. The way he lingers longer in the nursery once it is finished, standing with his hands folded behind his back as though awaiting instruction. The way he asks questions now without rehearsing them first. The way his voice softens when he speaks of the future, of arrangements and schedules and things that might be needed.

He begins to refer to the child as a *he,* despite the sex being impossible to know.

Mirelda does not correct him.

By the final weeks, her body feels heavy with inevitability. Sleep comes in fragments. The child's movements, once reassuring, become sharper, more forceful, then strangely subdued. The physicians murmur reassurance while Rhalin listens in closely.

Celith says nothing, but Mirelda notices that her aunt begins coming by more often in the evenings, sitting with her under the pretence of reviewing correspondence, but she tells Mirelda that fluctuations are normal and to not worry.

That night, labour begins.

There is no sudden agony, no dramatic collapse. Just discomfort that

does not resolve. Pressure that deepens rather than fades. A tightening low in her abdomen that returns again and again with growing insistence.

Mirelda recognizes it immediately. She sends for the physicians herself.

Celith remains. She does not hover, but she does not leave either. She positions herself where she can see everything without being in the way. The room is prepared with practiced efficiency. Lamps are lit. Linen is laid out. Water is heated. The air thickens with the scent of herbs and clean cloth.

Hours pass.

Mirelda bears it with control. Her breathing remains measured, her movements deliberate. Pain is not unfamiliar to her. She treats it as information rather than punishment. She notes its rhythm, its escalation, the way it pulls her inward and demands attention. Still, it takes its toll.

Her body strains in ways she has never demanded of it before. Muscles tremble. Sweat gathers at her temples. Her jaw aches from clenching it closed against sounds she refuses to make.

The physicians work quietly and efficiently. Hands press and adjust. Instructions are given in low voices. Mirelda complies without protest.

Something shifts.

She senses it before anyone speaks. A subtle wrongness, not sharp but

unmistakable. The room feels different. The physicians' movements slow. A pause stretches too long. They exchange glances they think she does not see. Celith crosses the room and suddenly grabs her hand, gripping with a tightness she is unused to feeling from her aunt.

Mirelda understands.

The child does not move.

She waits for confirmation that does not come. She waits for a heartbeat that is not found. No one says the words immediately. No one rushes to speak them aloud. There is no single moment of revelation. No phrase that shatters the world. Just a gradual narrowing of possibility until there is only one conclusion left standing.

When the child is delivered, there is no cry.

The silence is immense.

It presses in on her ears, her chest, her throat. Mirelda stares at the ceiling, breath coming shallow now despite her efforts. Her body aches with an effort that has nowhere to go, with contractions that complete themselves toward nothing.

Celith's thumb traces circles on her hand. The physician's voice is gentle when she finally speaks.

"I'm sorry, my lady."

Mirelda nods once. They place the child in her arms anyway. They— He is indeed a son, as Rhalin had seemingly anticipated.

He is small. Perfect. Entire.

Too still. She felt him move inside her, and now he is bereft of life.

She doesn't know what happened.

Mirelda looks at him without blinking. She notes the shape of his mouth, the fine softness of his hair, the delicate curve of his fingers. She registers the weight of him against her forearms, the way his head rests without resistance.

He looks like his father.

Her chest tightens painfully, with an emptiness that feels cavernous. As though something essential has been removed without warning, leaving a hollow she cannot orient around. There is no surge of emotion to anchor her. Only absence. Only space where something should have been.

Rhalin, when he is granted access to the room, makes a sound she has never heard from him before. It breaks from him entirely unfiltered, a raw, animal sob that collapses his posture and brings him to his knees beside the bed.

"Oh," He says, again and again, "Oh."

He reaches for the child with shaking hands.

Mirelda allows it.

He takes the small body into his arms and folds over it, shoulders shaking, tears falling freely now. His grief is immediate, physical, consuming. He weeps without shame, without apology, as though the world has split open and he has fallen through it.

Mirelda watches. She does not cry. She feels… Not numb. Hollow. As though the centre of her has been quietly evacuated, leaving her upright but structurally compromised. The absence is louder than pain would be. She can feel it echo with every breath.

When the physicians finally withdraw, leaving them alone, the room feels cavernous.

Rhalin clutches the child for a long time. He presses his face into the soft bundle and weeps openly.

“I wanted him,” He says hoarsely, “I wanted to be his father.”

The words tear something open in Mirelda. She shifts carefully, her body protesting the movement, and reaches out. Not to the child. To Rhalin. Her hand settles on his shoulder, firm and steady.

“I know,” She says, her voice quiet, “I’m sorry.”

It is the first thing she has said since the delivery. Rhalin looks up at

her then, eyes red and unfocused, grief hollowing his face into something older, more fragile.

“I— I tried. I tried to w–want it properly. To do it right.”

“You did,” Mirelda replies, the sheer physical exhaustion making her speak slower, “You did everything that was required.”

“That’s not the same,” Rhalin says, breaking again.

“No. It is not.”

Celith oversees it personally.

She says nothing as she watches the bundle carried away, but her grip on her cane tightens until the wood creaks faintly.

In the days that follow, Mirelda moves through the household as though through water. Everything takes more effort. Her body is suddenly lighter in a way that feels wrong. Condolences arrive. Formal. Restrained. She receives them appropriately.

Celith intercepts what Mirelda does not need to see.

Rhalin grieves openly. He cries without apology. Corin does not leave his side.

Mirelda observes it all with a clarity sharpened by loss. One evening,

Celith joins her in the empty nursery. The cradle remains untouched, its wood still pale, the linens folded exactly as they were left. The room smells faintly of fresh timber and herbs meant to soothe infants who never arrived.

Celith stands beside Mirelda for a long moment without speaking. She does not fill silence unnecessarily.

“This will not be spoken of as weakness,” She says at last, but her voice is different than before. Lower. Less formal. “Not here. Not by me.”

Mirelda inclines her head, “I know.”

Celith turns slightly, enough that Mirelda can see her profile. The lines at the corners of her mouth deepen.

“You carried well,” Celith continues, “Your body did what it was asked to do. Sometimes that is not enough. That is not failure.”

Mirelda’s jaw tightens.

“This house has buried children before,” Celith says, “Daughters. Sons. Infants whose names were chosen and never spoken aloud again. Your mother faced the same tragedy. Amaranthe blood has not been spared grief simply because it is powerful.”

She pauses, then adds more quietly, “Nor have its women.”

Something stings behind Mirelda's eyes. Sharp. Sudden. She focuses on the far wall, on the clean joinery, on the careful symmetry of the space. Her breath stays steady, but only just.

"I did not—" Mirelda begins, then stops. The words tangle uselessly. She swallows and tries again, "I understood the risks."

"That does not lessen the loss," Celith replies gently, "Understanding is not insulation."

Mirelda presses her palm flat against her abdomen. It is light now. Wrongly so. As though something has been taken without leaving any weight behind to prove it existed at all.

Celith's hand comes down over hers. It is firm, like before. Warm. Unmistakably there.

"You are not diminished by this. You are not lacking. And you are not alone in it, no matter how solitary the bed felt."

The sting intensifies. Mirelda's throat tightens. For a heartbeat, she is not entirely certain she will manage to keep herself composed.

She does. Barely.

She exhales through her nose, slow and controlled, and straightens her shoulders as if posture alone might hold her together.

"I will try again," She says, because that much is true.

Celith nods, approval threaded now with something else. Affection. Pride. Acknowledgment of shared womanhood rather than authority.

“Do so only when you are ready. And not because you think you must atone.”

Mirelda does not answer. She cannot trust her voice. Celith squeezes her hand once more, then releases it. She does not linger.

Mirelda remains in the nursery after she leaves.

The cradle does not accuse her. It simply waits.

She turns away before the waiting becomes unbearable.

Mirelda learns that grief does not arrive all at once.

It comes in increments, each one small enough to be endured on its own, but cumulative in a way that weakens the structure over time. She wakes each morning expecting the hollow to have eased, only to find it unchanged, a quiet absence that follows her from room to room.

Black ribbon appears at doors. Correspondence is answered with solemn brevity. Councillors lower their voices when they speak to her. No one says the word *stillborn* unless required to.

Rhalin continues to cry. Mirelda sees him in corridors with his face blotched and swollen, eyes rimmed red, shoulders drawn inward as though bracing against a constant wind. He does not excuse himself. He weeps as a man who has lost something essential and does not know how to stop reaching for it.

As days pass, the crying changes.

It becomes heavier, more exhausted. He sleeps poorly. He forgets to eat unless reminded. His posture collapses inward, the careful composure he cultivated over years of survival slipping away piece by piece. When Mirelda speaks to him, he answers politely, but there is a delay now, as though words must travel a longer distance to reach him.

He speaks of the child constantly.

“My son,” He says, to anyone who will listen, “He would have—” He stops, throat closing, the sentence collapsing into silence.

She feels the words lodge painfully in her own chest each time she hears them. *My son.* The possessive is startling in its intimacy. She had never imagined the phrase would matter to her.

It does. No longer is it just *“An heir and two spares.”* A son wouldn’t have been an heir, but she finds herself suddenly not caring for the logistics anymore. The thought of children is no longer abstract or simply obligation. She— She would have loved him. *Did* love him. She understands that something shifted along the way, unnoticed and unacknowledged, until it was too late to pretend otherwise. She had grown invested. Quietly. Thoroughly.

She continues to rise at the same hour, to attend to correspondence, to hold meetings. Her body aches in ways the physicians assure her are normal, a consequence of labour without reward. She accepts this as another debt paid.

But she finds herself pausing unexpectedly.

Standing in a doorway, uncertain why she entered the room. Reaching for her abdomen without thinking, hand meeting emptiness. Losing entire minutes to memories that do not have images attached to them, only sensations. Weight, warmth, the quiet certainty of life continuing beyond her.

Corin changes too.

Where once his resentment was contained, sharpened into discipline, now it has nowhere to go. He stays close to Rhalin, hovering with a vigilance that borders on desperation. He manages practicalities with ruthless efficiency, shielding Rhalin from minor decisions, anticipating needs before they are spoken.

He does not speak of the baby. Not once.

Mirelda notices this absence keenly. It is a choice, not an oversight. She does not force the issue. Whatever Corin feels, it is clearly volatile, and grief has already unbalanced the household enough.

The nursery remains untouched. No one suggests dismantling it. No one suggests using it. The room exists in a suspended state.

It is there that Mirelda goes one afternoon, without conscious

intention.

She staggers near the doorway, hand braced against the wall. It is closed, but the room smells of clean wood and nothing else. She is not quite sure she can look at the cradle.

She closes her eyes. Then she hears voices from within the nursery.

Rhalin's, hoarse and strained. Corin's, low and controlled in a way that suggests it has already been strained thin. Mirelda does not move.

"I can't—" Rhalin says, the words breaking apart as he speaks them, "I can't just stop thinking about him."

"You have to," Corin replies, "You will destroy yourself."

"He was my son."

There is a pause. Mirelda's breath stills. Corin speaks again, and this time his control slips.

"He wasn't. Not really."

The words hang in the air, obscene in their weight.

Rhalin makes a sound that is a mix between disbelief and wounded fury, "What did you say?"

“You know what I mean,” Corin says quickly, too quickly. The words tumble now, unfiltered, driven by something sharp and ugly, “He was hers. Amaranthe’s. This house’s. He was never going to be—”

“He was *mine,”* Rhalin says, his voice rising sharply, “He was my son too.”

The words land like a blow.

Silence crashes down, heavy and total. Mirelda feels as though the floor has shifted beneath her feet, as though something foundational has cracked open beneath the weight of that claim.

“I’m just saying—” Corin stupidly continues, and now there is panic threaded through the resentment, a desperation that strips away his usual precision, “Maybe it’s better this way. Maybe it’s a mercy. Maybe you don’t have to spend your life tied to her through—” He falters, breath catching, then pushes on anyway, reckless now, voice sharpening with each word, “Through a child that would never belong to us. Through something that was always going to pull you further away.”

He exhales sharply, as though bracing himself.

“You wouldn’t have been able to love him the way you think,” Corin says, “Not without losing yourself. Not without losing me.”

There is a beat— one breath, one heartbeat— where she thinks as though Rhalin might collapse inward under the weight of it.

Instead, his reply comes immediate and furious.

“Don’t. Don’t say that. Don’t make him into something lesser because it hurts you.”

“I didn’t mean—”

“You did,” Rhalin snaps, “You did mean it.”

The sound that follows is sharp and unmistakable: Flesh striking flesh. The slap cracks through the room, sudden and violent, followed by the scrape of Corin’s heel against the floor as he likely stumbles back.

Mirelda staggers away from the doorway. She turns and retreats with steps that are nearly a run.

The pain hits her all at once.

Grief— sudden and overwhelming, flooding the hollow she has been carrying for days and filling it until she cannot breathe.

My son. That phrase again, wrapping around her throat and squeezing tightly.

The words echo in her mind, she turns blindly, gripping the wall as she continues down the corridor. Her composure fractures completely, the careful control she has maintained shattering under the weight of the moment. Her chest tightens painfully. Tears come without warning, hot and uncontrollable, spilling down her face as she presses

a hand to her mouth to keep from making a sound.

She does not remember the last time she cried like this.

She sinks onto a bench in the corridor, shoulders shaking, breath coming in broken gasps. Images crowd her mind unbidden: The still weight of the child in her arms, the exhaustion of her body, Rhalin's sobbing face, the cradle now scarred by grief and anger. She thinks of the words uttered by Rhalin, but directs it to herself.

He was my son too.

The words echo again, and this time she lets them. She cries for the child. For Rhalin. For the future that has been erased. For the quiet investment she had not known she made until it was ripped away.

She hears the footsteps and gasp of a servant who rounds the corner. They retreat, and Mirelda doesn't look up when footsteps return— this time Celith, who immediately embraces her.

When she finally regains control, she forces it back into containment. She wipes her face, straightens her spine, and rises unsteadily to her feet. She will restore order later. She must for her own sanity.

But for this moment— this one moment— she allows herself the truth.

She has lost her son.

And the house feels suddenly and unbearably empty.

Days later, Mirelda is reviewing correspondence, quietly attempting to regain some sense of control within herself, when Rhalin enters her study without announcement.

The door opens quietly, but not cautiously. That alone is enough to make her look up.

He stands just inside the threshold, pale and drawn, eyes ringed dark with exhaustion. He has not slept. That much is obvious. His coat is properly fastened, his hair neatly arranged, but the care looks mechanical, as though performed out of habit rather than intention.

“Mirelda,” He says, dropping the *Lady* title in a way that tells her that this is serious.

“You should have sent word,” Mirelda attempts to reply evenly, but her voice hitches in a way she wasn’t expecting.

“I know,” He does not move farther into the room, “I’m sorry.”

She studies him for a moment, then sets the letter aside.

“Speak.”

Rhalin swallows. The movement is pronounced, his throat working as if around something sharp.

“I want Corin reassigned.”

The words land heavily in the quiet of the study.

Mirelda does not respond at once. She keeps her gaze on him, measured, searching for hesitation, for doubt. She finds none. Whatever turmoil churns beneath his composure has already settled into resolve.

“You understand what you are asking,” She says slowly.

“Yes.”

“Reassignment is not neutral. It will be noticed. It may be interpreted as disfavour. Even with discretion, such things leave marks.”

“I understand.”

She leans back slightly in her chair. Rhalin’s expression remains unchanged, lips pressed thin and eyes narrowed. Mirelda knows that he will not back down easily.

And for some reason beyond herself, Mirelda thinks it would be wise to try to dissuade him.

“Corin has been your constant for many years,” She says, “Your only personal attachment, if we are being precise. Removing him now—”

“He removed himself,” Rhalin says, sharply enough to surprise her.

He inhales, visibly steadying himself.

“And you want to punish him.”

Rhalin looks back at her then, eyes bright with unshed tears, “I want him gone. I know you heard. What he said,” He continues, voice lower now, strained but controlled, “Cannot be unsaid. It cannot be misunderstood. What he said was unforgivable.”

Mirelda’s fingers tighten minutely against the arm of her chair.

“You know that grief distorts. People say things they do not fully mean.”

Rhalin shakes his head, “No. I’ve been telling myself that since the moment it happened. But that was the truth. I heard it. He was relieved our son was dead.”

The word *our* lands between them, heavy and deliberate.

“I cannot live with that. I cannot sleep beside a man who sees my son as a mercy erased.”

Mirelda rises. She does not approach him immediately. She circles the desk instead, steps measured, skirts whispering softly against the floor.

When she stops, she stands at an angle to him rather than directly before him, reducing the sense of judgment.

“You are asking me to remove the only relationship that has ever offered you refuge.”

“Yes.”

“You are asking this knowing that it will leave you alone.”

“Yes.”

“You are asking it knowing that you will grieve him as well.”

“Yes.”

The last answer comes more quietly, but no less firmly. Mirelda closes her eyes briefly.

She had hoped— foolishly, perhaps— that the rupture might heal into something livable. That grief, once blunted, might allow them to reconfigure their bond into something less volatile. She had underestimated the severity of the wound.

“This will end what you have.”

“It already has,” Rhalin replies.

She looks at him then, truly looks. There is devastation written plainly across his face. Not anger. Not righteousness. Loss layered upon loss, stacked so densely it threatens to buckle him. This decision is not freeing him. It is costing him the last remnant of a life that once made sense.

Mirelda understands that now. She returns to her desk and opens a drawer, withdrawing a thin folder of correspondence. Her fingers move with practiced efficiency, even as her thoughts weigh the implications.

“I will not cast him completely aside. That would be unjust and unnecessary.”

Rhalin does not react.

“I will arrange for his reassignment to another household,” Mirelda continues, “A higher-ranked house, one that values competence. I will ensure that his service record reflects favour, not failure.”

Rhalin’s jaw tightens. He nods once.

“I will provide a positive reference. Explicitly. No ambiguity. His future will not be ruined by this.”

Silence stretches between them.

“This is the best I can offer,” Mirelda says.

“I didn’t ask for more,” Rhalin replies.

Neither of them speaks for several seconds. The weight of the decision presses down, thick and suffocating. Mirelda feels it settle into her chest alongside her own grief, another irrevocable shift in the household’s architecture.

“Do you wish to speak to him before the reassignment is enacted?” She asks.

Rhalin’s expression flickers.

“I don’t know,” He admits, “I don’t think… anything I say would make it better… I— I trusted him,” Rhalin says, almost to himself, “I trusted him with the part of me that never belonged anywhere else.”

The admission is raw and unguarded.

“He was my home,” He finishes quietly.

Mirelda feels something tighten painfully behind her ribs. A years-long secret relationship, sustained through fear and silence, dismantled not by law or punishment, but by grief and a single, unforgivable truth spoken aloud.

Mirelda speaks before she can reconsider it.

“I am sorry.”

The words sound inadequate the moment they leave her mouth. She pushes on anyway, voice steady but stripped of ceremony.

“I am sorry for the child. For what you were asked to give without safety. For the way this household demanded endurance when it should have offered shelter.”

Rhalin does not look at her.

“I am sorry,” She says again, more quietly now, “For the position you were placed in. For the imbalance you lived under. For the expectation that you would make yourself small enough to survive it.”

Her hands curl at her sides.

“And I am sorry,” She finishes, “That I believed order would be enough. That structure could replace care. That discretion could substitute for mercy.”

The room holds its breath. Rhalin remains very still. His face is carefully composed, the way it has been since the loss, but something tightens around his eyes. He does not speak. He does not acknowledge the apology in any way that could be mistaken for absolution.

After a moment, he inclines his head. The gesture is precise, formal, and empty of warmth.

“Lady Mirelda,” He says.

Nothing more. He turns and walks from the study. The door closes behind him with soft finality.

Mirelda does not move.

The apology lingers in the room, unanswered. She understands that it may never be accepted, and that this, too, is part of what she has chosen.

She remains standing long after his footsteps fade, the study returned to silence, knowing that something essential has passed out of her keeping and will not return.

Mirelda finds Corin in a small antechamber off the west corridor, seated on a low bench with his elbows braced on his knees and his face buried in his hands.

He does not look up when she enters. The signs are there anyway. The redness around his eyes. The way his shoulders are held too tightly, as though he has been bracing against something that has already passed through him.

She closes the door behind her.

“Corin,” She says.

He flinches at the sound of his name and straightens abruptly, swiping a hand across his face. When he looks at her, his expression is raw and defensive, grief and resentment tangled together so tightly they are difficult to separate.

“My lady,” He says hoarsely.

She does not comment on his state. She does not soften her posture. She does not sit.

“You are being reassigned,” Mirelda says.

The words are plain. Administrative. They land with a finality that leaves no room for misunderstanding. Corin stares at her. Something like relief flickers across his face for a second— Then it collapses under the weight of what the reassignment actually means.

“So,” He says, forcing a brittle edge into his voice, “This is it.”

“This is not exile. You will be transferred to another household. A higher-ranked one. Your service record will reflect favour.”

He lets out a short, humourless laugh and scrubs a hand through his hair.

“Of course it will,” He says, “You’re very thorough.”

She ignores the barb. It is easier to be frank and cold here, she thinks, because she realizes that she too was offended by his thoughtless words.

“The decision has been made at Rhalin’s request,” She continues, “It will be enacted within the week.”

That gets through. Corin’s composure fractures. His mouth tightens, and he looks away sharply, blinking hard. When he speaks again, his voice is rough.

“He wouldn’t even come himself.”

“He cannot. Not now.”

Corin nods once, sharply, as though bracing himself against the truth of it. His hands curl into fists, then loosen again. He speaks quietly.

“I said something unforgivable. I know that.”

Mirelda studies him for a long moment. He looks smaller than she remembers. Not diminished in rank, but stripped of the careful poise he once carried so easily.

“Yes. You did.”

He swallows, “I didn’t mean it the way it sounded,” He adds, the words rushing now, desperate, “I was angry. I was afraid. I was watching him slip away and I didn’t know how to stop it.”

“I am aware,” Mirelda replies simply.

Corin looks up at her then, eyes bright with unshed tears.

“And it doesn’t matter,” He says.

“No. It does not.”

The acknowledgement seems to drain what little fight remains in him. His shoulders sag, and he exhales slowly, as though releasing something he has been holding since the night of the loss.

“Will he be all right?” Corin asks after a moment.

Mirelda does not answer immediately.

“He will endure,” She says at last, “As he always has.”

Corin closes his eyes. When he opens them again, there is resignation there, brittle and aching.

“When do I leave?” He asks.

“Soon,” She turns toward the door, then pauses, “For what it is worth,” She says, without looking back, “When you said that this arrangement was not a mercy… I now agree with you.”

Mirelda leaves him there, alone with his grief and the certainty of departure, the door closing behind her with a sound that feels far too much like an ending.

Life carries on because it must.

Accounts still require signatures. Horses still need shoeing. Tenants still bring petitions. The servants move more softly for a time, eyes lowered, voices subdued, but the machinery of the Amaranthe household never truly stops.

Mirelda moves through it like a figure carved of pale stone.

She does what is required of her. She attends councils. She signs orders. She listens when Celith speaks of borders and trade routes and the slow, creeping pressure of the Eastern Dominions against their neighbours. She hunts when the season allows, rides hard and long through the fields until her muscles burn and her thoughts go quiet.

At night, she returns to her chambers and lies awake, staring at the dark canopy above the bed.

Rhalin sleeps in the same room now, ever since Corin left. He does not touch her, nor does he even share their bed. But they share the space with a careful distance, two people orbiting the same loss. Sometimes he sits at the small table by the window, embroidery hoop in his hands, needle flashing softly in the candlelight. Sometimes he simply sits, hands folded, eyes unfocused.

They speak little at first. When they do, it is practical.

“The midwife has returned to the capital,” He tells her one evening, “She left instructions with the house physician.”

“Good,” Mirelda replies.

Or, “The nursery curtains have been taken down. I thought it best.”

“Yes,” She says, “Thank you.”

Weeks pass. Then months.

The sharpest edge of grief dulls, not because it has healed, but because the body cannot sustain that level of pain indefinitely. It settles into them instead, a weight carried quietly.

Mirelda begins to notice small things.

Rhalin no longer flinches when the word *child* is spoken in council. He does not look away when other women bring their daughters to court functions, small hands clasped in theirs, hair braided with ribbons.

He watches them, thoughtful rather than broken.

One afternoon, as rain lashes against the windows, Mirelda finds him in the west sitting room, carefully repairing a tear in an old wall hanging. The pattern is simple, utilitarian. His stitches are precise.

“You didn’t have to fix that,” She says.

He looks up, “I wanted to.”

She nods and sits across from him, uncharacteristically quiet. After a moment, she says, “You’re doing well.”

He considers the words, “I am doing,” He replies. Then, after a pause, “Better than I expected.”

Something in her chest loosens.

They begin, slowly, to talk about things beyond necessity.

About his moth collection, which he has resumed tending with quiet reverence. About her hunts, the way she prefers the clean finality of a rifle over the pageantry of falconry. About Celith’s relentless expectations and the strange comfort of knowing exactly what is demanded of you.

Three years pass.

Time does not soften the memory of loss, but it does dull its edges enough to make daily life navigable again. The estate adjusts, as estates always do. Grief becomes something contained within walls rather than spilling into corridors. The nursery door stays closed. The cradle is removed. Another use is found for the room. Order reasserts itself.

Mirelda and Rhalin settle into a pattern that is outwardly impeccable. He remains the picture of a dutiful consort. She governs with the same steady authority she always has. Together, they give the impression of harmony without intimacy, which satisfies most observers. Those who look for scandal find none. Those who look for warmth learn to look elsewhere.

They do not speak of the child they lost. Not aloud anymore. There is no prohibition against it, no decree of silence, but the absence is mutual and deliberate. The grief exists between them like a sealed room neither wishes to reopen without necessity.

Corin is not spoken of either.

Celith, however, is not deterred by silence forever.

She waits for the appropriate moment. It comes on a mild afternoon, over tea, with rain tapping softly against the windows. The conversation has circled safely around provincial politics, harvest forecasts, and a minor dispute between neighbouring houses. Then Celith sets her cup down with care and looks directly at Mirelda.

“The line cannot rest on one grave,” She says. Her tone is even. Not unkind, but also not negotiable, “You know that.”

Mirelda meets her gaze without flinching.

“I do.”

There is no further pressure. Celith does not ask when. She has never been a woman who needs to belabour a point. The implication is enough.

That night, Mirelda sends for Rhalin.

He comes promptly, as he always does, expression neutral, posture attentive. He stands near the door at first, then takes the chair opposite her desk when she gestures for him to sit.

She does not preface what she is about to say.

“Are you willing to try again?” She asks.

The words are quiet, direct, stripped of ceremony. There is no attempt to cushion them. Mirelda has learned that delicacy does not make this easier. It only prolongs the discomfort.

Rhalin does not answer at once. He closes his eyes. Just briefly. When he opens them again, she sees the fear there immediately. It is not hidden. It has not been eroded by time. It sits alongside something else now, something steadier.

“Yes,” He says.

The word costs him. She can see that too. But he does not hesitate. He does not qualify it.

“Yes.”

Mirelda inclines her head.

“Thank you,” She says.

They proceed as they did before. With an almost clinical attention to boundaries. There is no pretence of romance, never was, no attempt to create meaning where there is none. Rhalin finishes in a vessel. This time, it takes three attempts.

When her menstruations stop, Mirelda informs him the same way she would deliver any other fact of governance.

“I am with child,” She says.

Rhalin sits down slowly, as if the floor has dropped away beneath him and only just returned. His hands come together, fingers interlacing tightly. His breath shudders once before he can stop it.

“Alright,” He says. The word is almost lost beneath the weight of everything it contains.

This time, he— *Stays.* He does not retreat into formality or distance. He does not try to insulate himself from hope. Instead, he allows himself a cautious, watchful investment. It shows in small, practical ways. He brings her tea each morning without being asked, always at the temperature she prefers. He reminds her to eat when meetings run long. He adjusts pillows at night with quiet efficiency, careful not to wake her more than necessary.

It doesn't feel like his attentions is just for the child anymore.

When the nursery is reopened, Rhalin oversees it again.

He chooses fabrics in muted tones. No pastels. He insists on furniture that is sturdy, well-balanced, unlikely to tip or splinter.

"I don't want it to feel like a shrine," He says once, when she asks him about a particular decision. His voice tightens on the word, "It should be lived in. It should… survive use."

Mirelda nods.

"Yes," She says, "It should."

The pregnancy progresses without incident. There are no alarming signs, no whispered concerns. The household remains alert but hopeful. Celith watches closely, offering advice only when asked, her presence steady rather than intrusive.

Rhalin grows visibly heavier with anticipation as the months pass. He does not speak of names at first. He avoids speculation. He avoids giving the child a gender this time. But Mirelda notices the way his gaze lingers when he thinks she is not watching, the way he pauses outside the nursery door in the evenings.

When the child begins to move, he asks once, quietly, if he may feel it.

Mirelda nods and guides his hand.

He startles when the movement presses back against his palm. His breath catches, and for a moment he looks almost undone.

“They’re strong,” He says, after a pause.

Mirelda says nothing. She allows him that certainty.

The labour, when it comes, is long and difficult.

Mirelda endures it. Her jaw tightens. Her hands grip the sheets until the fabric creases beneath her fingers. She does not cry out. She does not plead. Perhaps because of the prior stillbirth, Rhalin is allowed in the room and stays at her side the entire time.

He does not speak much. When he does, his words are measured and steady. He offers water. He braces her shoulder. He bears witness.

When the child is finally placed in Mirelda’s arms, warm and squalling and undeniably alive, something inside her breaks open without warning. The sound of the infant’s cry fills the room, sharp and insistent. It is the loudest thing Mirelda has ever heard.

“It’s a girl,” The midwife says, smiling through her own tears, “Strong lungs. Good colour.”

Mirelda looks down at the tiny face, red and furious with life. Dark hair curls damply against her scalp. The fists clench and unclench with astonishing force.

“She’ll be named Alis,” Mirelda says. Her voice is steady, but her chest aches with the weight of it, “After my grandmother.”

Rhalin swallows hard.

“Alis,” He repeats.

He does not touch the child at first. He only looks. His hands hover, uncertain, as though afraid that contact might somehow undo this fragile reality. Then, slowly, carefully, he reaches out and brushes a finger against Alis’s hand.

Her fingers curl around it reflexively.

The sound that escapes him is not dignified. It is a fractured laugh, threaded through with disbelief and joy.

“She’s here,” He whispers.

Mirelda watches him, and for the first time in years, something like peace settles over her. It is the quiet certainty that this moment exists, and that it has not been taken from her.

They do not become a family in the way sermons describe.

There is no illusion of romance. No convenient rewriting of their history. They remain what they have always been: Two people bound

by duty, by shared loss, and now by shared responsibility.

But there is a fragile trust again.

Rhalin holds Alis with reverence. He learns her cries. He memorizes the way she settles when rocked at a certain angle. Mirelda observes him with a measured gratitude she does not articulate.

They are careful with one another. They are honest. They are present.

It is not a story for songs.

It is something quieter.

Something that endures.

After Merevine is born— named for Rhalin's grandmother, small and sharp-eyed, already watchful in a way that makes the midwives exchange knowing looks— Mirelda does not change her mind.

She had always intended three.

Merevine's arrival settles the second place neatly. Another daughter, healthy and alert, her cry thinner than Alis's but no less insistent. A spare, in the clean, political sense of the word, one who could inherit if necessity demanded it. Her sex smooths certain conversations before they are ever spoken. Ledgers close. Assumptions align themselves

without resistance.

Celith is pleased. Not effusive, never indulgent, but satisfied in the way of someone who values continuity above all else. The aunts fall quiet, for the moment. There is nothing left for them to press.

Rhalin receives Merevine with a different steadiness than he had Alis. There is joy, but it is calmer now, less brittle. He has learned how to hold a child without fear of disappearance. He watches Merevine with curiosity rather than awe, already attuned to the particularities of her temperament. When she fixes him with her dark, assessing stare, he huffs a quiet laugh.

“She’s counting things already,” He murmurs once.

Mirelda believes him.

They wait the proper span of years before proceeding again. Not out of sentiment. Not out of hope. Bodies require recovery, and politics prefers spacing. There is no need to rush what is already inevitable.

When the third attempt is made, it is approached with the same precision as the first two. The same arrangements. The same boundaries. No touch. No illusions.

Arleth arrives on schedule, named for a brother Mirelda never had, one who died in infancy.

He is healthy, loud, red-faced, and furious at the world from his first breath. His cry is deeper than his sisters’, more demanding, as though he expects immediate response and is prepared to be offended by any

delay.

His sex is noted and immediately circumscribed.

He will not inherit. He will not hold land in his own right. He will be educated, placed well, given comfort and opportunity within the strictures of what is permitted. A son of the house, but not its future, but that does not mean he will not be loved by his parents.

Rhalin holds him carefully, studying the small, scrunched face with an expression Mirelda cannot immediately read. There is affection there, unmistakable, but also something more complicated. Grief does not vanish simply because joy exists alongside it. Mirelda watches the two of them together and feels a strange, quiet tenderness take root. She does not analyse it.

Three children.

That is enough.

After Arleth, Mirelda closes the matter entirely. There will be no fourth. No contingency beyond what already stands. She informs Celith, and this time there is no disappointment, only relief at the clean finality of it. The line is secure. The house is settled.

Much later, when the children are older and the sharp edges of grief have dulled, Mirelda may admit— if pressed, and only then— that she indulges Arleth more than is strictly necessary. That he grew into an… interesting man probably because she allowed it to happen. That she grants him a softness she does not quite extend as readily to his sisters. She does not name the reason aloud, but it exists all the same, a quiet counterweight to the son she never raised.

The arrangements end. The vessels are put away.

The subject does not come up again.

After Arleth's birth, the house settles into a new rhythm that feels, for the first time, finished.

The moment comes a few days later, quiet and almost painfully ordinary. They are standing together in the nursery, Mirelda holding Arleth with careful competence while Rhalin adjusts a blanket that does not need adjusting. Merevine watches from her cradle, dark eyes tracking everything. Alis is at Mirelda's knee, one hand curled into the leather of her riding glove.

"That's… all, then?" Rhalin asks softly.

He does not say children. He does not say heirs. He says it the way one asks whether a long road has finally ended. Mirelda looks at him for a moment, really looks. The lines grief has left behind his eyes have softened into something steadier. He has changed in ways she had not predicted, not weaker for having broken once, but rearranged.

"Yes. Three. I'm finished."

Rhalin exhales. It is not relief, exactly, nor sorrow. It is something like a door being shut against weather. He nods once, a small, precise motion.

“Good. That’s… good.”

Later, when Mirelda thinks back on it, she realizes that is the moment the last tension drains out of their marriage. The knowledge that nothing more will be asked of him in that way. The certainty of an ending.

From then on, the shape of their lives becomes unmistakably platonic, though neither of them ever names it as such. They do not need to. They are bound by law, by children, by grief shared and survived. Romance would be redundant.

Outwardly, they continue as wife and husband.

Rhalin hosts teas and seasonal gatherings with a grace that never fails to draw comment. He becomes known for his embroidery, his quiet wit, the way he remembers names and preferences without ever making it seem like labour. Mirelda attends when necessary, offers a steady arm, allows him to shine. When asked about their private life—always by women who pretend it is idle curiosity— she answers smoothly.

“Our private lives are just that. Private,” She says simply.

No one challenges it. Power smooths over a multitude of irregularities.

When by themselves, they settle into something easier and, over time, something unexpectedly deep.

They speak plainly to one another. They argue rarely, but when they do it is without cruelty. Mirelda learns the exact cadence of Rhalin's silences: Which mean he is thinking, which mean he is hurt, which mean he is afraid. Rhalin learns when to leave her alone, and when to press despite her inclination to withdraw.

They co-parent with a competence that surprises even them.

Alis grows into her role early, bright and thoughtful, already absorbing the language of obligation the way other children absorb lullabies. Mirelda watches her with a careful eye, correcting when necessary, praising when earned. Yet somewhere between Alis's seventh birthday and her first formal riding lesson, something shifts. Mirelda catches herself thinking not of succession or alliances, but of Alis's laugh, the way she wrinkles her nose when concentrating.

Mine, she thinks, *Not heir. My daughter.*

Merevine follows differently. Sharp-eyed, observant, far more interested in people than rules. She notices everything: Who sits where, who touches whom, who never does. She asks questions that make servants nervous and adults deflect. Rhalin answers her honestly when he can. Mirelda does the same, though her honesty is more carefully measured.

Arleth is adored by both of them, if in different ways. Rhalin dotes openly, carrying him, reading to him, indulging small whims. Mirelda is more reserved, but she never misses a milestone, never forgets a preference. She ensures he is safe, educated, and unafraid. That, to her mind, is love enough.

As the children grow, they inevitably notice things.

They notice that their parents do not kiss. That their bedrooms are separate. That affection, when shown, takes the form of quiet understanding rather than touch. They notice that Rhalin flinches slightly when certain guests linger too close, and that Mirelda positions herself subtly between him and scrutiny.

When Alis asks, one evening, why they do not kiss like other married couples, Mirelda answers without hesitation.

“Our marriage was arranged,” She says, “For duty, not romance. That doesn’t mean we don’t care for one another. It means our care looks different.”

Alis considers this, serious beyond her years, “Is that bad?”

“No,” Rhalin says gently, before Mirelda can speak, “It’s just… another way.”

The children accept it with the easy pragmatism of those who have never known anything else. They are loved. They are secure. That is enough.

Years pass.

Rhalin’s life expands in small, careful ways. A travelling merchant’s son, passing through with bolts of silk and stories of the coast. A brief, discreet attachment to a visiting servant from the western reaches. Nothing lasting. Nothing foolish. Mirelda is aware of these trysts without ever acknowledging them directly. She makes certain the staff who know are loyal. She ensures privacy. She does not ask questions.

Their tentative friendship deepens not through grand gestures, but through accumulated trust that Mirelda had to rebuild and earn. Through shared evenings reviewing household accounts. Through quiet walks in the gardens where conversation drifts from politics to moths to the oddities of children. Through the unspoken agreement that neither will use their power over the other unless absolutely necessary.

Mirelda knows she holds authority. She never forgets it. But she also knows Rhalin has earned her respect in ways no husband groomed for conquest ever could.

He did not demand. He endured. He chose his children, even when the world made that choice precarious. He accepted loss without bitterness toward her. That matters. One evening, years later, Mirelda catches herself watching him as he kneels to help Merevine with a stubborn knot in her hair, patient and attentive.

She does not tell Rhalin that she has stopped viewing their children as lineage and leverage. That those frameworks feel insufficient. She does not need to. He seems to understand regardless, meeting her gaze with a small, knowing smile.

They never become lovers. They never pretend to be something they are not. But in the strange arithmetic of their world, they build a marriage that works— Not despite its irregularities, but because of them.

And in a society that expects ownership and obedience, they find something rarer.

Mutual regard.

The illness does not announce itself.

At first it is a matter of tiredness, nothing more. Rhalin excuses himself from gatherings a little earlier than usual, citing the children, the weather, the press of the season. He rests between obligations instead of flowing seamlessly from one to the next. Mirelda notices the way his shoulders slope sooner, the way his voice thins at the end of long evenings.

Fatigue is respectable. It requires no explanation.

Then comes the cough.

It is dry, persistent, irritating rather than alarming. It clings to him through one season and into the next, resistant to the small remedies offered by household wisdom. He laughs it off when Mirelda remarks on it, waving a hand dismissively.

“Drafts,” He says once, “Too many open windows.”

Mirelda closes the windows anyway.

Weeks pass. The cough does not worsen, but it does not leave. It becomes part of the background of the house, a soft interruption to conversation, a pause between sentences. Servants glance up when it breaks the quiet, then look away again, trained not to stare.

Rhalin eats less, though he insists he is not hungry rather than unwell. His embroidery slows. Where once his hands moved with effortless

precision, they now still occasionally, as though awaiting instruction from a body that hesitates to comply. Mirelda catches him flexing his fingers absently, brow faintly furrowed.

She says nothing. Not yet.

When autumn arrives, the cough deepens. It acquires weight. The sound changes in a way that sets her teeth on edge, a roughness that suggests irritation beneath the surface. He begins to sleep poorly, waking with a tightness in his chest that leaves him breathless for a moment before it passes.

That is when Mirelda sends for a physician. Not just any, but one from the Royal Academy.

The woman arrives with suitable gravity, her case polished. She listens, presses, then frowns. She speaks of humours and imbalances, of delicate constitutions and the lingering effects of damp air. She recommends rest, tonics, a mild bleeding to relieve pressure.

Mirelda allows it once.

Rhalin submits with his usual compliance, face pale but composed. The blood does not ease anything. If anything, it leaves him weaker, his colour slower to return. The remedies multiply. Teas brewed from bitter bark. Poultices applied warm to the chest. Steam infused with resin and prayer. Each is endured. None are effective.

The illness does not surge. It *settles*. Rhalin no longer participates in public ceremonies such as Hearthurn or Covenant Day. Neither does Mirelda.

By winter, it is no longer an intrusion but a presence, shaping the rhythm of days. Rhalin naps in the afternoons now, stretched carefully on a chaise near the window, a blanket drawn up even when the fire burns high. Mirelda learns to measure time in intervals between his waking and sleeping.

He begins to lose weight. Not dramatically. Not at first. His clothes hang a little looser, the angles of his collarbones more pronounced beneath linen. When Mirelda remarks on it, he smiles faintly.

“I suppose I never was meant for abundance,” He says lightly.

She does not smile back.

The children notice from the start.

Alis grows quiet, her attentiveness sharpening into vigilance. Merevine watches with unsettling intensity, eyes tracking her father’s movements as if committing them to memory. Arleth becomes clingy, pressing close whenever permitted, curling against Rhalin’s side with an instinctive urgency.

Mirelda adjusts where she can.

She rearranges her schedule, trims journeys when possible, and delegates ruthlessly. When absence is unavoidable, she leaves instructions precise enough to sound cold. Extra firewood. Fresh broths twice daily. No drafts. No unnecessary visitors.

When she is home, she sits with him.

Not constantly. She reads reports while he dozes, listens when he speaks, supports his weight when his legs falter unexpectedly. She does not comment on the moments when his breath comes shallow, when he pauses midway through the stairs and pretends to examine a tapestry while waiting for strength to return.

Spring comes. The illness does not lift with it.

Instead, new symptoms arrive quietly, slipping past vigilance. A dull ache beneath the ribs. A tightness that wakes him at night. Occasional streaks of blood in the cloth he uses to wipe his mouth after coughing.

That is when the physician stops pretending optimism.

She speaks more carefully now, choosing words that offer neither hope nor certainty. Something lodged. Something wasting. Something they cannot reach. Mirelda listens, expression unreadable, and asks practical questions she struggles to answer.

What remedies remain?

How long?

What comfort can be offered?

Rhalin listens too, polite and composed, and thanks the physician when she finishes as though she had delivered good news.

Later, when they are alone, he asks her quietly, “Will it be… long?”

Mirelda considers lying. She does not.

“I don’t know,” She says, “But we will manage whatever comes.”

He nods, accepting this with the same trust he has placed in her for years. It unsettles her more than fear would have.

As months pass, his strength ebbs unevenly. There are good days, when he walks the garden paths she has levelled for him, pausing to sit in the sun and watch the children play. There are bad days, when even sitting upright leaves him exhausted, breath shallow, eyes closed in careful concentration.

Rhalin begins to apologize too often. For the inconvenience. For the worry evident in their children.

Mirelda corrects him each time, sharply at first, then more gently.

“You are not a burden,” She tells him, “You are ill.”

The distinction matters to her. She is not sure it does to him.

There are evenings when the children gather in Rhalin’s rooms by unspoken agreement.

Not lessons, not stories with a purpose. Just presence.

Alis sits at the small table with her writing slate, dutifully copying a passage she already knows by heart. Merevine perches on the window bench, feet tucked beneath her, watching the light fade with narrowed eyes. Arleth sprawls on the rug, dismantling a wooden horse with focused intensity. Rhalin reclines against the cushions, a blanket drawn over his legs. He watches them with an expression that is soft in a way Mirelda has learned not to interrupt.

“You’re holding the chalk wrong,” He tells Alis gently.

She adjusts her grip immediately, “Like this?”

“Yes. Your wrist will tire less.”

Mirelda, seated nearby with a ledger she has not turned a page of in some time, observes the exchange.

“You didn’t correct her posture,” Merevine remarks mildly from the window.

Rhalin smiles, “I chose my battles.”

Merevine hums, unconvinced.

Arleth looks up suddenly. “Papa, will you come watch the dogs tomorrow?”

Rhalin hesitates, just a fraction too long. “If the weather behaves,” He answers carefully.

Mirelda interjects without looking up, “The weather will behave.”

Rhalin glances at her, amusement flickering despite the fatigue, “So decreed.”

When the children are eventually coaxed away to bed, Alis lingering last to kiss his cheek with solemn care, the room grows quieter.

Rhalin exhales, long and slow.

“They’re growing. All of them. Too quickly.”

“That is the usual complaint,” Mirelda replies, “You made the mistake of noticing.”

He smiles faintly, “I wanted to be certain I noticed enough.”

The cough interrupts him, rough and insistent. He turns his head away out of habit. Mirelda waits until it passes, then hands him a glass without comment. He drinks.

After a moment, he speaks again.

“I received a letter from my brother this morning.”

She looks up then, “Which one?”

“Jerrit,” He says, “The middle one. His wife is expecting again.”

“Good. That will steady their household.”

“Yes. He was… anxious. About the dowry arrangements. About whether the Amaranthe stipends would continue, now that—”

He does not finish the sentence.

“Now that you are ill,” Mirelda supplies evenly.

Rhalin nods, “I told him not to worry. But I wanted to be sure.”

“They will continue,” She says without hesitation, “All three. Their arrangements were never contingent on your health.”

Relief loosens something in his shoulders.

“Thank you,” He says quietly, “They won’t say it, but they know what that support means. Their wives do as well.”

“They are competent men. They married well. They have not embarrassed the house. That is sufficient.”

He studies her for a moment, “You could have let it lapse.”

“I suppose I could have. I see no reason to.”

He inclines his head, acknowledging the choice for what it is. Celith arrives later that week, hair more grey and her movements slowed by age, unannounced but expected. She takes in Rhalin’s condition with a single assessing glance, then sits at his bedside as though she has always done so.

“You look thin,” She says.

“Your concern wounds me,” Rhalin replies dryly.

Her mouth twitches, “Good. That means you’re still yourself.”

She reaches out and adjusts the blanket with brisk efficiency. Then, softer, “You’ve done well by them.”

He knows who she means. He nods, “They’ve done well by me.”

Celith turns to Mirelda, “You’re staying longer these days.”

“Yes.”

“That’s wise.”

Mirelda does not respond. She rarely does when Celith states the obvious.

Later, when Celith has gone and the room has settled again, Rhalin speaks, voice quieter.

“I’m glad they’ll remember me like this,” He says, “Not… diminished.”

“They’ll remember you as present,” Mirelda replies, “That matters more.”

He considers that, “It does,” There is a pause, “Mirelda.”

“Yes?”

“When the time comes—” He stops, breath catching, then continues, “I don’t want there to be scrambling. Or uncertainty.”

“There won’t be,” She says immediately.

“I’d like my brothers to be told before it becomes public.”

“They will be.”

“And the children—”

“I will tell them. With you. If you are able.”

He closes his eyes briefly, “Thank you,” Then, unexpectedly, he adds, “I’m glad it was you.”

She looks at him.

“This life,” He clarifies, “This arrangement. It was far from perfect but… It could have been… worse.”

“Yes,” She says after she finds her voice again, a quiet ache forming in her chest, “It could have.”

She does not say that it could also have been crueler. Or emptier. Or that she will miss him in ways she is only beginning to understand.

Instead, she sits with him as the light fades, the house quiet around them, holding what remains with care.

The certainty arrives soon after.

There is no single pronouncement, no dramatic verdict delivered by candlelight. It comes instead as a convergence of small, unarguable facts Mirelda can no longer arrange into optimism. The cough no longer loosens. The weight does not return. The pain, once an intrusion, settles in and makes itself at home, blooming beneath the

ribs and stealing Rhalin's breath in shallow, humiliating increments.

The physician from the capital does not use the word death. She does not need to.

She speaks of growths. Of corruption within the body. Of ailments that cannot be cut away without killing the patient outright. Her hands remain folded throughout, posture immaculate, as though discipline alone might soften the truth.

"Time," She says eventually, "Comfort. Warmth. Ease."

Mirelda listens without interruption. When the woman finishes, Mirelda nods once and dismisses her. She stands alone in the hall long after the footsteps fade, her mind moving with a ruthless clarity that surprises even her.

The priests would call it rot of the humours. The physicians call it a malignancy. Mirelda calls it what it is: Something eating him alive, slowly and without regard for rank, obedience, or endurance.

She makes arrangements.

Pain draughts, stronger now, measured carefully so Rhalin remains lucid for as long as possible. A new bed, lower and easier to access. The children's lessons shortened and relocated again so they can come and go without exhausting him. Servants instructed— firmly and without explanation— that Rhalin's rooms are now inviolate.

And then, after the practicalities are exhausted, another thought rises. Unwelcome. Persistent.

Corin should know.

The realization sits strangely in her chest. It is not guilt that drives it, nor obligation. It is something colder, and in its own way, kinder.

Rhalin has loved once in his life. Loved openly, desperately, foolishly, in the only way he was ever allowed to love— Through shadows, stolen hours, and the constant, grinding fear of discovery. That love had been severed not just by betrayal, but by inevitability. By Mirelda herself, standing calmly at the centre of a system that had no room for men like them.

She knows this. She has always known it.

This world is unkind to men. Unkind in a way so normalized it rarely bothers to disguise itself. Men exist by permission: of mothers, wives, patrons, houses. They inherit little. They decide less. Their bodies are regulated, their labour assumed, their futures arranged.

Men who love other men are afforded even less mercy.

Even here, in a comparatively permissive house, it survives only through silence and the indulgence of women powerful enough to look the other way. Rhalin and Corin were never going to be allowed a life together. Not here. Not anywhere that mattered.

In another world, Mirelda thinks, they might have lived quietly. Shared rooms without fear. Grown old together in some minor holding where no one cared what two men did behind closed doors.

In this world, their story was always going to end badly.

She sits at her desk long after midnight and writes the letter herself. It is brief. Direct. Devoid of apology.

Corin,

Rhalin is ill. Gravely. He is not expected to recover.

You were important to him once. I believe you remain so.

If you wish to see him, you may come. Discretion will be assured.

—Mirelda Amaranthe

She seals it with her signet and sends it by her fastest courier, trusting Corin to understand both the risk and the invitation.

The reply comes a week later.

Yes.

He arrives at night, as requested.

Cloaked. Hood drawn low. Escorted through a service gate rather than the main drive. Time has altered him. His hair is shorter now,

threaded faintly with grey at the temples. His posture is guarded, the easy familiarity of youth worn down by years of careful survival.

He looks older than he should. *So do they all,* Mirelda thinks, *Men are forced to age so quickly.*

They don't exchange pleasantries. She leads him through the servants' corridors, past doors that remember him even if the house pretends otherwise. At Rhalin's room, she pauses.

"I will give you privacy," She says, "As much time as you need."

Corin swallows. His eyes are already bright, his control fraying at the edges.

"Thank you," He manages.

It is the most honest thing he has likely said to anyone in years. Mirelda leaves them. She stations herself at the far end of the corridor, far enough not to intrude, close enough to ensure no one else does.

She does not listen.

Rhalin knows the moment Corin steps into the room.

It is not sight that tells him. It is the sudden, bodily certainty of recognition, the way one knows a familiar weight has been set down

nearby. His breath catches, shallow and sharp.

“Corin?” He says. The name breaks around the illness, “You shouldn’t —”

“I know,” Corin says, already at his side, dropping to his knees, “I know.” His hands lift, hover, fall. He looks at Rhalin as though afraid he will vanish if stared at too directly, “I shouldn’t have waited.”

Rhalin huffs out a laugh, thin and uneven, before it is overtaken by a cough, “You always did wait too long.”

They look at one another. Years then promptly compress and fold in on themselves.

“You look—” Corin starts.

“Dying?” Rhalin offers gently, “Yes. That part is true.”

Corin bows his head, pressing his forehead briefly to the mattress, as though grounding himself. When he looks up again his eyes are wet, lashes clumped darkly together.

“I told myself I hated you,” He says, “That it was easier to believe you chose her. Chose the house. Chose everything that wasn’t me.”

Rhalin watches him as he speaks. It has been years— longer than grief usually allows memory to stretch without blurring— and yet the shape of him is immediately, devastatingly familiar. The line of his mouth,

still expressive even when held tight. The way his hands curl in on themselves when he is upset, as if bracing for impact. But beneath it all, Rhalin sees the same man who once steadied his shaking hands in a summer orchard, who learned the rhythm of his silences before he ever learned his speech.

Something inside Rhalin loosens, then aches.

He had imagined this meeting in fragments over the years, all full of anger and impossible.. He had not imagined this: Corin on his knees, eyes bright with tears, still looking at him as though he matters.

“I didn’t,” Rhalin says at once. The words come with more force than he expects, “I didn’t choose her over you.”

Corin flinches slightly, as if struck by the certainty of it.

“I chose survival,” Rhalin continues, breath shallow as another cough claws up his chest. He turns his face aside, presses a hand briefly to his mouth until it passes, “I chose the narrow path that let us both remain standing. And later—” His voice falters despite himself. He swallows, throat working, “Later I chose my children. Because once they existed, there was no other choice left. Not for me. Not ever.”

Speaking costs him more than he wants Corin to see. He can feel it in the ache beneath his ribs, in the faint dizziness that follows each longer sentence. Still, he watches Corin absorb the words, sees the anger shift into something rawer and more dangerous: An understanding.

“I didn’t stop loving you,” Rhalin adds quietly, “I just stopped believing the world would let me keep you.”

The words leave him with less steadiness than he intends. He feels them move through his chest, loosen something there, and then settle again like dust disturbed after too many years. Corin does not answer at once. He only looks at Rhalin, and in that look is so much of the past that it almost hurts to breathe.

“You remember the south wing?” Corin asks suddenly, “The rooms they never used?”

Rhalin exhales carefully. Memory rises easily now, unguarded. “The ones that smelled like dust and old varnish,” He says, a faint smile tugging at his mouth, “Where the windows stuck no matter how hard you pushed.”

“You used to count your steps before you knocked. Every time. As if the walls might be listening.”

“They were,” Rhalin replies softly. He has to pause again, waiting for his lungs to cooperate, “My mother’s maid nearly caught us once.”

Corin exhales, something close to a laugh slipping through, “You froze so badly I thought you’d faint. I had to put my hand over your mouth.”

“I bit you.”

“You did. Left a mark.”

Rhalin can see it again as clearly as if it were happening now. Corin’s

startled expression, the quick flash of pain followed by amusement, the way he hadn't pulled away. The way he had only pressed closer, whispering reassurance into Rhalin's ear while Rhalin's heart tried to escape his ribs. He remembers how thin and terrified he had been then, how silence had lived in his bones. And Corin— He had been steady and unafraid to stay.

The memory makes his chest tighten, not painfully, but with a kind of ache that is almost sweet.

Corin's gaze drifts, drawn to the small display shelf by the window. Even now, there are pinned wings there, carefully preserved. A pale dusk-moth. A blue-veined empress. One with markings like spilled ink.

"You kept them," Corin says quietly.

Rhalin follows his gaze, "Of course I did." His voice is softer now, thinner, but certain.

"I remember when you hated insects," Corin says, that faint, broken smile returning, "You wouldn't even walk through the orchard at dusk."

Rhalin feels warmth bloom behind his eyes. He blinks, steadying himself against it, "That was before you handed me the jar."

"I thought you'd drop it."

"You told me it wouldn't hurt me. You said they were harmless. Beautiful, if you looked closely enough."

“I was trying to impress you.”

“It worked,” Rhalin replies without hesitation.

The memory unfolds between them, shared and intact. A summer evening stretched long and gold, the air heavy with warmth and crushed grass. Moths rising from the hedges in soft, living clouds. Corin’s hands guiding his, patient and sure. The careful lifting of wings. The reverence of it, as though they were handling something sacred.

“I liked that they were fragile,” Rhalin says after a moment. Speaking makes him cough again, a short, ugly sound he cannot quite smother. When it passes, he continues, quieter, “That they only existed for a little while. It felt… honest. Like nothing was pretending to last forever.”

Corin swallows, “You started staying up late after that. Waiting for them.”

“I started waiting for you,” Rhalin corrects gently.

Corin’s breath stutters, and Rhalin sees the truth of that moment land all over again— years too late to be useful and still unbearably sharp, “That was when I knew. I didn’t have a name for it yet. But I knew I was lost.”

“I fell in love with you when you didn’t laugh at how quiet I used to be.”

Corin looks up sharply.

“You sat with me for nearly an hour,” Rhalin continues, voice thinning as fatigue presses in, “Didn’t push. Didn’t fill it. You just… stayed. No one had ever done that before.”

“I was terrified,” Corin says, voice tightening, “I thought if I spoke, I’d ruin it.”

Rhalin studies him. This man he once knew better than himself. The grief in his face. The regret etched so deeply it has become part of him.

“You didn’t ruin it,” Rhalin says softly. Then, after a pause that costs him breath, “Not then.”

Corin’s mouth trembles, “I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Yes, Rhalin thinks. *You should have.*

The truth is painful in its simplicity. He remembers the moment with aching clarity, the room too quiet, the grief too raw, the words spoken like a blade swung blindly. He remembers how something inside him had gone cold and sharp all at once. Love had not entirely vanished— But trust had cracked, and never fully healed.

“I know you were hurting,” Rhalin says at last, “I know you didn’t mean him harm.” He has to stop again, draw in a careful breath, “But when you said it— when you made him smaller because you were afraid of losing me— something broke. I couldn’t protect him from that. And I couldn’t pretend it hadn’t mattered.”

Corin bows his head, tears dropping soundlessly onto the coverlet, “I was wrong,” He whispers, “I know that. I’m sorry.”

Rhalin reaches for his hand. It takes effort; his fingers feel stiff, slow to obey. Corin meets him halfway at once, as if he’s been waiting for permission. Their hands fit together as they always have, familiar despite the years.

They talk of the children then.

Rhalin describes them carefully, lovingly, pausing when his breath demands it, resuming as soon as he can. Alis— serious and bright, already carrying the weight of the world with quiet determination. Merevine— watchful and sharp, missing nothing, asking questions no one is ready to answer. Arleth— all fierce affection and unguarded devotion, loving without fear in a way Rhalin hopes he never has to unlearn.

Corin listens as though memorizing them. As though committing them to some private ledger of things that mattered, even if they were never his to claim.

“He reaches for me the way I reached for you,” Rhalin says quietly, exhaustion pulling at the edges of his vision, “Without thinking.”

The quiet is thick but no longer cruel. Rhalin becomes acutely aware of Corin’s hand around his, the familiar shape of it, the warmth. He thinks, distantly, how many years he spent learning to live without this simple contact. How strange it is that it still fits.

“I loved you,” Corin says at last, as if confessing something fragile and

long-kept.

Rhalin nods, eyes bright, breath unsteady but calm, “I know.”

There are a thousand other things he could say. That he loved him too. That part of him always will. That some loves do not end so much as they change shape and learn to stay quiet. But none of those things would make this moment truer.

So he says nothing more.

They do not kiss. They do not reach for anything beyond what is already there. This is not a beginning reclaimed. It is an ending, one that is honest and without illusion.

When Corin finally lets go, he does it carefully, as though afraid Rhalin might shatter. Rhalin watches him go with clear eyes and a steady heart.

He lies back against the pillows, exhaustion settling over him like a familiar blanket. His chest aches, his breathing shallow, but his hand remains warm where Corin’s had been, as though memory itself lingers there.

For the first time in a long while, there is nothing left unsaid.

And that, Rhalin thinks, is enough.

Rhalin dies in the early hours of the morning.

Mirelda is not at his bedside when it happens.

She is awake, seated at her desk, working through correspondence by lamplight. It is the kind of work that does not stop simply because someone is dying. There are petitions awaiting seal, reports requiring annotation, a shipment dispute that will escalate if ignored. She will remember this detail later and find it neither shameful nor regrettable. He had asked, more than once, that she not turn his death into a performance of devotion.

A servant comes to her door, pale and shaking, and does not need to speak. Mirelda rises at once, already composed, already braced.

By the time she reaches Rhalin's room, his face has gone still in a way it has not been for weeks. The pain has finally released him. His mouth is slightly open, as if he had meant to say something and decided against it. The lines of strain have eased. He looks, for the first time in months, like himself again.

She stands there for a long time.

Simply quiet.

She reaches out and closes his mouth. Straightens the coverlet. Adjusts the candle so the light does not fall too harshly across his face. These are not gestures of grief, exactly. They are acts of order. The same instinct that has governed her since girlhood, since inheritance settled onto her shoulders like armour she learned to wear well.

The children are told at breakfast.

Alis stiffens, jaw setting in a way that is already too familiar. She does not cry. She asks what happens next, what the rites require, whether she is expected to attend council in Mirelda's place that afternoon. Mirelda tells her no, but does not scold her for the instinct.

Merevine watches Mirelda's face rather than reacting immediately, cataloguing expression and tone with that unnerving attentiveness that has always marked her. Only later, alone, does she cry. Quietly.

Arleth cries openly, burying his face against Mirelda's skirts, clutching her as if afraid she might disappear too. Mirelda holds him without hesitation. She allows herself this much softness. It costs her nothing to do so.

The estate goes into formal mourning. Mirelda sends for his brothers.

Black ribbons. Bells rung at the appropriate hours. The priestesses arrive, solemn and efficient, to perform rites that speak of obedience, service, and release. Rhalin is praised as a devoted consort, a gentle father, a credit to the Amaranthe household.

All of it is true.

None of it is complete.

Corin does not attend the funeral. She has a note delivered of date and time. But he responds that he cannot attend— That'll invite too many

questions he'd prefer for Mirelda to not answer. He tells her, quite plainly, that he's protecting Rhalin and not her.

Life continues because it always does.

That is the cruellest part of it, Mirelda thinks. Not that people die, but that everything else keeps moving, indifferent and relentless. Crops still need inspection. Disputes still require judgment. Colonial reports still arrive with their neat columns of numbers and casualties.

She resumes her work within the month.

It is only later— months later, when the sharpest edges of grief have dulled into something survivable— that she allows herself to name the truth she has been circling since Rhalin's death.

The world is unfair.

This is not a revelation, exactly. Mirelda has always known the Dominions are built on hierarchy sharpened into law. She has benefited from it too much to pretend otherwise. But Rhalin's life has given that truth a shape and a weight it did not have before.

He did everything he was asked to do.

He was obedient. Polite. Productive. He gave her heirs. He never embarrassed her. He never rebelled, never demanded more than was allotted to him. He bent himself into a shape the world could tolerate.

And still, he was never allowed to be whole.

She thinks, sometimes, of what Rhalin might have been if he had been born a woman. Or born lower, paradoxically, where expectation is cruel but simpler. Or born somewhere else entirely, outside the reach of Alira's temples and their convenient myths.

She thinks of Corin, too.

Of how easily men can be ruined without ever breaking a law. Of how discretion becomes survival. Of how love, when it runs in the wrong direction, is treated as appetite rather than bond.

Mirelda does not rage against this. She is not built for useless anger.

Instead, she adjusts.

As the years pass, her reputation shifts in subtle ways. She becomes known not as indulgent, nor permissive, but precise. A woman who notices everything. A woman who does not waste punishment where it is unnecessary.

Fraternization, in particular, is where this precision becomes visible.

She sanctions what can be sanctioned.

If a male servant and a female one grow attached, she requires paperwork, witnesses, clear expectations. Marriage if appropriate. Transfer if not. Order is maintained. Reputations are preserved. No

one is surprised. No one is ruined.

But where attachment cannot be spoken aloud— where it runs sideways, quiet and dangerous— she does something else.

She pretends not to see.

She does not ask why two women have requested adjacent rooms for years. She notices patterns and then chooses silence. She redirects gossip. She removes particularly observant stewards from circulation. She ensures that those who must remain discreet are never pushed into visibility they cannot survive.

With men, the margin is narrower. Always narrower.

She cannot openly protect them. The law, the priestesses, the councils — None of them would tolerate that. So she does the only thing she can.

She enforces vigilance with a light hand.

No public displays. No foolish risks. No letters left unsecured. No emotional excess that draws attention. She will not shield anyone from consequence if they insist on defiance, but she will not go hunting for infractions either.

Those who understand this thrive.

It is not kindness, precisely. Mirelda does not think of it that way. It is

triage. Harm reduction. The smallest adjustment she can make without tearing the structure down around her children's heads.

Still, word spreads.

The Amaranthe estate is strict but survivable. The Lady does not enjoy cruelty. The Lady values competence over spectacle. The Lady will not ruin you simply for existing quietly.

By the time Alis is grown, Mirelda has fully become what others call her: The Lady.

Not Mirelda Amaranthe. Not the young woman who once watched two terrified young men in a greenhouse with a rifle still warm in her hands.

The Lady is calm. Remote. Exacting.

And shaped, irrevocably, by the man she married and buried.

It is only after enough years have passed, after Rhalin's memory has settled into respectability, after no whisper of impropriety could plausibly stain him, that Mirelda allows herself to return to a freedom.

She begins to visit prostitutes.

Openly.

Not with fanfare, but without secrecy. She does not hide her carriage. She does not disguise herself. She does not pretend these visits are something other than what they are. She chooses establishments that are reputable, staffed by men who understand silence and negotiation.

And she pays well.

Well enough that some of those men stop selling themselves within a year. Well enough that a few return home in the colonies with money enough to care for aging parents without desperation hanging over every decision. Mirelda does not track what becomes of them afterward. She does not require gratitude. She does not even think of it as charity.

It is simply… balance.

What the world extracts, she returns where she can.

This, too, becomes part of her reputation. The Lady is pragmatic. The Lady has appetites but no scandals. The Lady understands transactions.

It is this shaping, this long practice of assessment rather than impulse, that makes her reaction almost inevitable, many years later, when she notices a pattern among her staff.

A servant who lingers too long in the kennels and stables. The Hunting Marshal who replaces her old one, becoming softer in the presence of a man with a stutter. A young man who flinches at being seen eating, who moves like punishment is always imminent.

Mirelda notices these things the way she notices everything else.

She does not romanticize it. She does not moralize it.

She assesses risk.

Fraternization, she knows, is already occurring. Whether sanctioned or not is the only question. Whether it will end in scandal or stability.

She thinks of Rhalin, in his sickbed. She thinks of Corin, walking away into the dark because the world had no place for him to stay.

She thinks of how easily Jonas could be crushed by a single rumour. How easily Branwen could be disciplined for impropriety despite years of loyal service.

And she thinks, with a clarity sharpened by age and loss, that there is a clean solution here.

A sanctioned courtship.

A marriage that protects rather than punishes. How fortunate they are, she thinks, to be a woman and a man. How narrow the door, and how necessary it is to walk through it while it remains open.

It is almost laughably simple.

She knows, even as the words form, that she will sound pragmatic

rather than tender. That Branwen will bristle. That she will not hear mercy where it exists.

That is acceptable. Mirelda has learned, over a lifetime, that mercy in this world rarely looks like softness. It looks like paperwork. Like structure. Like legitimacy.

It looks like offering people a place where they cannot be so easily destroyed.

And yet.

There is one thing she does not see.

One omission that will only become visible much later, under blood and smoke and a wolf's dying body.

Branwen has no surname. Mirelda never gave her one.

Not out of malice. Not out of calculation. Simply because it never occurred to her in that moment.

Branwen was competent. Respected. Secure in her role. Mirelda had never needed to formalize her place beyond function. In Mirelda's world, names are tools of inheritance, of claim, of legal entanglement. Branwen had never asked for one. Maud did. Mirelda had never considered that the absence itself was a vulnerability.

It is a blind spot born of power.

One of the few she carries without realizing it.

When it is finally corrected— when blood is spilled, when survival demands a declaration— it will feel, to Mirelda, less like generosity than like repair.

A thing she should have done long ago.

And if, in the end, she becomes known as a Lady who is strangely lenient, who offers sanctioned courtship where others would offer punishment, who permits quiet arrangements and enforces discretion rather than terror—

If that reputation traces back to a man who lived obediently and died incomplete—

Then so be it.

She does not think of it as sentiment.

She thinks of it as balance.

The world will not become kinder in her lifetime.

But perhaps, in small, deliberate ways, it can become less cruel.

Chapter End Notes

Side stories will remain here because A): I want everything in one spot and B): They will at most be 2 parts, no more. I had intended it to just be one-shots but of course it got away from me lol. Point is, they will not be the same length as the main story. With with, The Lady's side story is finished. Alas, I'm guilty of the bury your gays trope... I'll have to make up for it sometime by writing something with a happy ending.

And if I get another comment about Branwen/Jonas and children, I'm going to write Branwen getting an abortion. They're childfree. ☝□□

Chapter 18: Side Story: Yes, Lina

Chapter Summary

In which Eliam tries to figure out what he wants in his life.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Wayrest Tavern wakes before the sun does.

It is not loud about it. No shouting, no banging shutters or no shouted orders down the stairs. Instead, the building stirs the way a body does. Wood pops softly as it cools, the hearth settling into itself, the faint smell of yesterday's bread lingering in the air.

Eliam is already up.

He stands barefoot behind the long common-room counter, sleeves rolled to his elbows, polishing tankards that are already clean. He has polished them twice. He does it again anyway, methodical, precise, turning each one just so, checking the rim for fingerprints no one else would ever notice. The counter gleams faintly in the grey morning light slanting through the front windows, catching on old knife marks and the faint burn-ring from a pot set down too hot, too fast, years ago.

Wayrest is quieter in the off season. The roads are still passable, but most merchants have chosen to wait until the weather further down the roads steadies. A pair of rooms upstairs are occupied, one by a trader who snores like a dying bellows and another by a traveling priestess who murmurs prayers in her sleep. The rest of the inn is empty, waiting.

Eliam likes it best like this. When the place is full, he performs. When it is empty, he almost *belongs.*

He moves from tankards to the hearth, stirring the embers back to life with careful, economical motions. He sets porridge to warm because it is the right thing to have ready. He checks the breadbox, frowns at a loaf that has gone slightly stale, and sets it aside for crumbs. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is ever wasted if he can help it.

The Wayrest Tavern itself is respectable without being grand. Thick beams cross the ceiling, darkened by decades of smoke. The walls are lined with mismatched chairs, some carved, some plain, but all sturdy. There are little attempts at finery everywhere if you know how to look — Embroidered runners on the tables, curtains sewn from fabric that almost passes for silk, a framed print of a manor garden hung slightly crooked near the stairs. Eliam put that one up himself.

He pauses beneath it now, tilting it straighter by a hair's breadth, then nods in satisfaction.

"Order," He murmurs, as if the room might argue with him, "Like any proper noble house."

Not that the tavern is anything close to a noble house, and he's mellowed out somewhat when it comes to presenting it as such, but that doesn't mean he can't still *try.*

He crosses to the window seat where the morning light is strongest and retrieves the *Genteel Standard*, folded neatly beside a ledger. The paper is crisp, the print clean. *Issue No. 3,498, Late Spring Edition.* He smooths it reverently before opening it, though not with quite the old intensity. He skims now, rather than devouring.

Still, some habits cling.

FEATURE: ‘Domestic Gravity and the Thoughtful Husband’
An Essay by Matron Ellescourt of Halden Reach

In uncertain times, a husband must become the still point around which his household turns. Reduce unnecessary speech. Increase intentional obedience. A man who anticipates correction will rarely need to be corrected.

Eliam hums, unconvinced but intrigued. He has been told before— by this same paper, by voices equally assured— that a man ought to be *noticed.* That he should cultivate presence, polish his wit, exceed expectation just enough to appear indispensable without appearing ambitious. One winter issue had praised *“artful visibility,”* encouraging husbands to volunteer for tasks unasked, to speak elegantly when spoken to, to perform usefulness like a well-rehearsed courtesy.

Now, silence. Stillness. Be the furniture, but refined.

He flips the page.

MANNERS & MORALS: ‘On Being Seen Too Much’
A reminder that visibility is a privilege, not a right.

If your wife does not comment on your efforts, do not assume they were unnoticed. Silence is often satisfaction. Persist quietly.

That one makes his chest tighten, just a little. Silence has meant many

things in his life. Approval, sometimes. Danger, often. Neglect most of all.

He reads on, past an article on proper stair-descending posture and a truly baffling column suggesting husbands avoid mirrors during periods of personal doubt. The *Standard* contradicts itself the way gossip always does— Confident in tone, careless with consistency. Last year it insisted that a man should anticipate his wife's needs before she names them. This year it warns against presumption. One month demands initiative; the next calls it impertinence.

Eliam has spent years trying to thread those needles perfectly, only to discover the target shifts with the hand that throws it.

There is comfort in the predictability of it, even now. Less desperation than before. Less clutching. Since Jonas's letter— since the visit, since that morning at the gate— Eliam no longer reads as though the words are life rafts. They are… suggestions. Aspirations. Something to glance at over porridge rather than kneel before.

Still.

He folds the paper carefully and sets it aside, fingertips lingering on the edge. What he wants, he realizes, not for the first time, is not better advice, nor more refined instruction. He wants someone to tell him, plainly and without revision, *this is what is expected of you.* Not today's ideal. Not tomorrow's correction. Just the rule, and the assurance that it will hold.

Children.

The thought has been circling him for weeks now, quiet and persistent. It arrives the same way these articles do: With implication

rather than command. He hasn't spoken it aloud yet. Not properly. Lina has mentioned it with that practical calm of hers— *"not now, but soon"*— as if discussing the weather or the price of grain.

Soon implies readiness. Soon implies stability.

Eliam looks back at the folded paper, at its tidy certainties and shifting demands, and feels the familiar unease stir. If he cannot be certain what kind of husband the world requires, how is he meant to know what kind of father it will expect him to be?

The question does not yet frighten him into silence. But it does make him ache for something firmer than advice, something that will not change its mind once he has learned the shape of it.

Eliam scrubs a hand through his hair, already oiled and combed into careful waves that never quite behave the way noble illustrations suggest they should. His hair is brown like Jonas's, though thicker, more inclined to curl if left alone. His face is broader too, his cheeks fuller and jaw softened by more meals. He continues to dress with intention: A vest cut just a bit too snug in imitation of court styles, a shirt with decorative stitching meant to echo something he once saw on a visiting magistrate. All homemade work and, as he begrudgingly knows, entirely unconvincing when it comes to real noble garments.

A pretender, some might say.

A man trying, Eliam would argue.

He moves again, unable to stay still with the thought pressing at him. He wipes down tables, straightens chairs, adjusts the flowers in the chipped ceramic jug by the bar. They're nothing special— early wild blooms, stubborn things— but they brighten the place. He likes that.

No one has told him to do any of these things, but he assumes it is expected of him.

He next unhelpfully thinks of Jonas. Of the way his brother had looked that morning. He was steady. He was certain of something. His little brother was *chosen.* Eliam thinks of how easily authority had settled on him without Jonas ever reaching for it. Eliam swallows, the old ache flaring briefly before easing. That, at least, no longer feels like loss. More like… distance. Manageable distance.

The stairs creak softly above him.

Eliam pauses mid-stir, spoon hovering just above the porridge pot, listening. He always knows the sound of her steps before she appears. Years of marriage have resulted in him memorizing the exact steps of his wife. Lina does not hesitate on landings. She does not linger to consider whether she's forgotten something. She comes down as if the day has already been assessed and found wanting.

The door to the back stairs opens.

She emerges into the common room with her sleeves already rolled and her apron tied, as though the house itself has dressed her on the way down. She is taller than Eliam by a small but unmistakable margin, enough that he has to tip his chin up to meet her eyes when she stands close. Jonas and himself have always been on the shorter side, much to his chagrin. She's broad through the shoulders too, solid in a way that speaks of years hauling barrels and sacks before she ever owned the place outright. This is a body shaped by work, not by leisure. Nothing wasted. Nothing ornamental. No homemade stitching or patchwork like what Eliam's wearing.

Her hair is dark, streaked faintly with early silver at the temples, braided tight and pinned up with a wooden clasp shaped like a knot.

No ornament. No nonsense. Her dress is practical wool, patched once at the elbow, sleeves rolled high enough that Eliam can see the faint scar along her forearm from a knife that slipped years ago. Boots worn soft at the heel. She smells faintly of soap and cold air, as though she's already stepped outside this morning, even if he knows she hasn't.

She doesn't look at him first.

She looks at the hearth. Then the counter. Then the porridge.

"Good," She says. A simple statement that the world has not gone wrong in the last hour.

Eliam straightens without meaning to. It happens every time. His shoulders draw back, spine aligning as if pulled by a string he doesn't remember tying. He becomes more *himself* under her gaze, somehow, even as he feels himself shrink to fit it.

"I thought we might have the trader down before long," He says quickly, the words tumbling out just a little too fast, "She stirred once already, and the priestess asked last night about an early meal. Nothing heavy, of course. I kept it simple."

Lina hums, noncommittal. She crosses the room and opens the breadbox, pressing a thumb into the top of a loaf to test it. Her brow creases, just slightly.

"This one's turning," She says.

"I'll crumb it," Eliam answers at once, "For the stew."

She nods, satisfied, and moves on. That is how it always goes. Lina does not waste words where action will do. Eliam has learned that her nods are worth more than other people's compliments.

Up close, her face is lined in the way of someone who has spent years squinting into smoke and sun alike. There is nothing delicate about her, but there is a steadiness to her gaze that makes other people falter first. When she looks at Eliam, he likes to think that she sees him whole— posture, polish, pretence and all— and does not bother pretending otherwise. She *did* marry him, after all.

"You've already done the tankards," She says, glancing at the neat row drying by the hearth.

"Yes," Eliam says, a touch too brightly, "I thought—"

"I know what you thought," She takes one anyway, checks the rim with her thumb, "That's fine. Don't do them again."

His shoulders relax, just a fraction, at the instruction. Not the permission— he would have obeyed regardless— but the *clarity* of it. The way it closes the door on uncertainty.

"Yes, Lina."

She turns then, eyes landing on the folded paper by the ledger.

"The *Standard?"* She asks.

Eliam hesitates, “I only skimmed.”

“Mm.” Lina reaches over, taps the ledger instead, “Market day. We’re low on onions and the last of the winter salt. There’s fish in if the river traders made it through the pass. We won’t need much. Off season.”

An easy night, then.

“That’ll mean less time in the kitchen,” Eliam says, hopeful despite himself.

“For you,” Lina agrees, “Which means you won’t exhaust yourself fussing.”

He flushes, “I don’t fuss.”

She gives him a look.

“You fuss.”

There it is. Not a scolding. Not a reprimand. Another statement of fact, directly specifically at him. Eliam swallows, heat creeping up his neck, a familiar, uncomfortable warmth that he has learned to associate with being *seen.* Seen accurately, perhaps. He’s never quite entirely figured it out himself yet, despite the years being with Lina. It unsettles him every time.

Lina reaches for her cloak, “Come on. Before the square fills.”

Naturally, they do not leave the Wayrest Tavern unattended.

Mara Pell is already there, leaning against the bar with her arms folded, a basket of apples at her feet. She lives two doors down and has been minding Lina’s bar since before Eliam learned how to skim foam without spilling ale. Her hair is iron-grey and cropped short, her sleeves perpetually dusted with flour no matter what she claims she’s been doing. The inn seems to ease in her presence, as if it recognizes a familiar hand.

“I’ll keep an eye,” Mara says, already reaching for a rag, “If the priestess asks for spiced cider before noon, I’ll tell her to repent.”

“Charge her extra,” Lina replies, already halfway down the steps.

Eliam pauses at the door to lock up, careful and precise. He checks the latch once. Then, because habit is a stubborn thing, he turns back toward Mara and bows. It’s not a quick dip of the head. Not the informal nod most men use in town. A full, careful bow, spine straight, hands neatly folded, the sort he thinks a minor noble might offer a matron in court.

“Thank you for your stewardship, Mistress Pell,” He says earnestly.

Mara snorts, “Get on with you, Eliam Dale. I’ll not have the floors polished into nothing while you’re gone.”

He flushes, straightening too quickly, “Of course.”

“And if you bow any deeper, you’ll hit your head on the bar.”

Eliam thanks her again, and then he and Lina step out through the back door into the cool morning, the inn settling behind them. He falls into step half a pace behind her without thinking. As they walk, Lina speaks of practical things— Prices rising, the baker’s son who left after his wedding, the need to find another pair of hands come summer.

“Most of the lads won’t stay once they marry,” She says, “Can’t blame them. If their family can afford it, they’ll be kept at home.”

Eliam nods. He knows this rhythm well. Unmarried men drift through the inn like tides, eager for coin, eager to prove themselves useful. Once they wed, they vanish into their wives’ households, absorbed into domestic roles that leave little room for wages or wandering. It is the way of things. The grind of it. He has made his peace with that, mostly.

“You’ll manage tonight on your own. Three tables at most.”

“Yes, Lina,” Eliam says quickly, “I can handle it.”

“I know,” Lina replies.

The market square opens up ahead of them, but it is not the riot of colour and noise it becomes in high season. The pulse is slower now, steadier, like a body at rest rather than one in motion. Lina steps forward without looking back, certain he will follow. And he does, naturally. It feels… correct, walking behind her, like lining up plates or setting chairs equidistant from the table.

The town of Wayrest sits where the road narrows before it widens again toward the capital, a necessary pause between long stretches of nothing. In summer, it swells with travelers and spectacle. Now, it holds itself inward. The buildings crowd close, stone and timber leaning in as if to listen for gossip from passing boots. Several shutters remain closed. Signs creak softly in the breeze— painted tankards, sheaves of grain, a stitched boot swinging on a rusted hook.

Somewhere a woman is hammering iron, the ring of it bright and steady in the thinner air, and a boy's laughter skitters down an alley like a dropped coin.

The stalls bloom outward from the central well in a loose, familiar pattern, but with gaps between them where vendors have not bothered to set up. Fish lies on beds of iceweed in smaller quantities than usual. Baskets of turnips sit half-full, dirt still clinging stubbornly to their skins. Bolts of dyed cloth flutter like captured birds, fewer hands reaching to touch them. Smoke curls from two griddles instead of five. A spice seller from the south has arrived early— or late, depending on how one looks at it— her wares announcing themselves before she does. Pepper, citrus peel, something sharp and green Eliam can never name.

Merchants and drovers move across the square, but there are substantially fewer of them than when the roads are thick with tourists and trade caravans. A pair of guards loiter at the edges rather than patrolling, eyes wandering.

Men trail behind women with baskets and ledgers, or cluster near the bread stalls waiting to be told what to carry. Eliam keeps close to Lina's shoulder, hands folded neatly around the market list she gave him during their short walk here. He looks, at a distance, almost respectable. Almost someone important.

They are nearly to the well when the voices reach him.

Not shouting. Not quite. Just loud enough to ride over the market's hum, to insist on being heard even by those pretending not to listen.

"…not beasts to be housed like furniture—"

"…continuity—"

"…ought to stand on his own land—"

Eliam slows before he means to. His steps falter, and Lina notices at once. Her pace eases, not stopping outright, but the adjustment is unmistakable. A wordless question.

Near the well, a knot of men has gathered beneath a banner tied too high and too tight against the stone. Old sailcloth, yellowed and patched, the paint still tacky in places where the dye has run. The slogan is bold and clumsy:

MEN ARE PEOPLE TOO

Beneath it, in smaller, more careful script, as though someone among them understands restraint even if the others do not:

THE WHISKERED COMPACT

The name lands with the peculiar force of something half-ridiculous

and half-explanatory. Eliam's eyes dip reflexively, then lift again, drawn despite himself to the men's faces.

The *whiskers* are the first thing anyone notices.

Full beards, stubborn and deliberately untrimmed. Some neat, some wild, some clearly grown in defiance rather than comfort, leaving uneven patches along the jaw. A refusal. A badge. A quiet provocation in a world where clean-shaven men are the expected shape of respectability. Eliam's hand rises before he can stop it, brushing his own smooth jaw. Shaving is often the first thing he does in the morning, an act so ingrained it barely feels like a choice.

A few women nearby snort openly. One merchant laughs outright.

"Shave and maybe we'll listen!" She calls, voice bright with mockery.

The men do not stop.

"There is no dignity," One of them says, tight with effort, "In being passed hand to hand like a tool when your wife dies. We keep homes. We raise children. We balance accounts. And still we are treated like wards without sense."

A guard stands nearby, hand resting casually on her belt. The men lower their voices a fraction, instinct honed by repetition, but they do not disperse. They never do. Not in summer crowds, and not now, when the square is thin enough that every word lands.

Eliam's stomach tightens.

He has heard of them, of course. Everyone has. Whispers traded over ale, jokes that land too hard and then retreat into laughter. Men who gather in market towns and way-stops, regardless of season, where travelers *might* carry their words onward even if most listeners do not. Men who are never taken quite seriously.

Men who speak of deeds and inheritance, of wardship and dignity, of what happens when a woman dies and leaves a husband behind like an unclaimed coat.

Eliam has never wanted to stand among them. The thought of shouting, of drawing eyes, of wearing fear openly on his face makes his skin prickle. He prefers fear kept tidy— pressed flat, folded small, tucked away where it can be mistaken for diligence. At the inn, he performs reassurance the way other men perform strength. Polite smiles, rehearsed speech, a posture that suggests ease even when his shoulders ache with it. Nobility, borrowed and exaggerated, has always felt safer than honesty. If he plays at importance well enough, perhaps the world will not notice how contingent his place truly is.

“If my wife passes,” One man says now, older than the rest, his beard shot through with grey, “I become nothing. Folded into her kin’s household like excess linen. That is not right.”

Another nods vigorously, clutching a sheaf of papers, “We don’t ask to rule. Only to remain.”

Lina stops. She simply pauses, weight settling evenly through her boots. Eliam halts with her, heart thudding harder than the situation seems to warrant. She does not scoff, nor does she sneer. She studies them the way she studies a warped beam or a leaky roof.

“We don’t need—” Eliam begins, then stops himself, uncertain why his chest feels so tight. His voice comes out too brisk, “We can go around.” Despite himself, he hears his own words for what they are: A self-soothing. A reminder spoken aloud that they are fine, that he is fine, that he has chosen his life and does not need to examine its edges too closely.

“I know,” Lina says quietly. But she doesn’t move yet.

The words keep coming, overlapping now as the men sense attention.

“Ought to be able to stand on our own land! To know where we’ll sleep tomorrow!”

Eliam swallows. Property. *The inn.*

What if something happened to Lina?

The thought arrives sharp and uninvited, like the crack of a dropped plate. He hates it immediately, hates the way it lodges in his chest. Lina is solid. Capable. Alive and very much here. To imagine otherwise feels like a kind of betrayal, as though the mere act of fearing could summon disaster.

And yet the law is clear. Everyone knows it.

Should Lina pass unexpectantly, the Wayrest Tavern would pass to Lina’s sister, or a female cousin if written in her will. Eliam would stay, perhaps, if she were kind. He would become a ward to her maternal family, or he would be thanked politely for his service and sent elsewhere, commended for his devotion and relieved of his keys.

Despite all the cooking and cleaning he has done for the tavern over the years, Eliam has no rights to it as a man. No claim that would survive grief.

“Folded into her kin’s household like excess linen.”

He has folded sheets like that. Knows the precise motion required to make them smaller, easier to store. Knows how little they matter once stacked. The men’s words crawl under his skin because they brush against the same fear he has never allowed himself to give shape to, only to smooth over with manners and performance.

Lina exhales through her nose.

They move closer to the well, close enough now that the men’s faces resolve into individuals rather than a mass. Weathered hands. Nervous glances. Determination worn thin at the edges. One of them meets Eliam’s eyes, hopeful and searching, and Eliam looks away at once, heat flooding his face. He would not know what to say even if asked. Words have always deserted him when they matter most.

A woman selling apples watches them pass, her expression unreadable.

“We have petitioned,” The older man says, voice steady despite the tightening crowd, “And we were told to be grateful. For wardship. For kind placement.”

His mouth draws thin.

“Gratitude does not keep a man housed.”

A woman near the spice stall scoffs, “It keeps you alive.”

Another laughs, “You want deeds? Be born right next time.”

The laughter cuts sharper this time. Meaner.

Eliam flinches despite himself. He hates the sound of it, not necessarily because the men are mocked, but because some small, treacherous part of him understands the fear underneath their words. Fear does not make people eloquent. It makes them repetitive. It makes them reach too far, say the quiet part aloud, grasp for language that might hold them steady and find only noise instead.

The *Genteel Standard* would call this a failure of discipline. An excess of speech. A man made visible when he ought to have remained contained. *Reduce unnecessary speech,* the column had advised. *Persist quietly.*

He understands, uncomfortably, why these men speak anyway. Eliam tells himself he is not like them. He has a place. He has a role. He has chosen it, shaped himself to it, learned its rhythms until they feel almost like relief. And yet the words land too close, echoing against anxieties he has trained himself not to articulate. He smooths them over instinctively, the way he smooths linens at the inn, flattening creases before anyone else can see them.

A younger man steps forward then, face flushed and beard patchy and overgrown as if he started growing it in defiance and lost patience halfway through.

“And what of marriages that go wrong? What of men bound to women

who despise them, who grind them down until there's nothing left? A woman may sever a bond. A man cannot. If a woman can leave a marriage, a man should be able to leave one that erodes him."

The square reacts as if struck.

"Are you speaking of *divorce?"* A woman barks incredulously, "You want the right to ruin yourselves?"

Murmurs ripple outward, gathering speed.

"Do you know what happens to a divorced man?" Someone calls, "No household will touch him."

"He's marked. Tainted goods!" Another says.

"And whose fault is that?" A voice snaps back, "The woman who freed herself, or the man who couldn't keep a marriage whole?"

The younger man pales but does not retreat, "We know the cost. We live with it already. A woman leaves and still has a name. A man leaves and becomes nothing— But at least it would be a *choice."*

Choice. The word hangs there, brittle and dangerous.

Eliam feels it settle uncomfortably in his chest. A woman can petition the courts for a divorce but a man cannot, not without the written permission of female relatives. Eliam knows exactly what happens to men who are divorced by their wives. He has seen them— Quiet

figures moved along by well-meaning relatives, spoken of with faint embarrassment, as if they were a mistake no one quite knows how to acknowledge. Divorce does not free a man. It unmakes him.

And yet the idea of having no avenue at all, no matter how dire the marriage, sends a slow chill down his spine. He has always told himself he would endure anything asked of him. That endurance is virtue. It is a noble thing to withstand anything. That being wanted is *enough.*

He thinks, unbidden, of Jonas.

Jonas young and small, stuttering apologies into empty space. Jonas learning early that obedience is safer than protest. Eliam knows—*knows*— that his brother has built a life now, chosen and cared for. And still the old fear stirs.

If Eliam cannot imagine a way out for himself, how could he ever imagine one for Jonas?

The thought is absurd. Jonas does not need rescuing. Eliam's idea of care has always been too tight, too full of rules meant to keep disaster at bay. And yet the worry clings, stubborn and humiliating.

A woman surges forward then, red-faced and furious, and before the guards can fully react, she grabs the edge of the banner. The sailcloth tears with a dry, ugly sound. Dye flakes onto the stones as a corner comes free.

"Ungrateful," She spits, shaking the torn cloth, "You want to throw away protection so you can play at being wronged?"

A guard steps in at last, palm raised, “Enough.”

The banner droops, wounded but legible, its message strained and crooked.

The older man on the well lifts his hands slowly, “We only ask to be acknowledged. A marriage that cannot be escaped is not safety. It is a cage with better manners.”

Silence follows, colder than the laughter before. Eliam feels it settle in his bones and Lina watches him for a long moment, then turns back when one of the men addresses her.

“Madam,” He says carefully, “You keep an inn, don’t you?”

“I do,” Lina replies.

“And if something were to happen to you,” He presses gently, “Would you not wish your husband kept safe in the place he helped build?”

The square hushes, just a little. Lina answers evenly, “I’d wish my husband cared more about staying alive than staying in charge.”

A few women laugh. The guard snorts.

“But,” Lina adds, quieter but no less firm, “Fear doesn’t make you wicked. It just makes you loud.”

The man inclines his head, accepting the half-mercy of it, “Then hear us. Even if you never agree.”

Lina does not promise anything. She turns away instead, her hand settling briefly between Eliam’s shoulders, a grounding touch that sends an unwelcome rush of relief through him.

“Come on,” She says, “Fish will spoil faster than politics.”

“Yes, Lina.”

They move off, the voices rising again behind them— Measured now, persistent, unlikely to vanish simply because the square disapproves. Eliam walks with his eyes down, thoughts refusing to line up.

The Whiskered Compact.

Men who want ownership. Men who want exit. Men who want to stand on ground that cannot be taken from them. He tells himself again, immediately and with great conviction, that he does not want any of that.

And then, less convincingly, he wonders if that is entirely true.

Ownership sounds vulgar when shouted beneath a banner, but quieter versions of it live in his chest all the same. The wish to be necessary, to have his place acknowledged in ink rather than courtesy. Exit sounds reckless— ruinous, even— but the idea of a door, however narrow, stirs something uneasy in him. He has never wanted to leave Lina. He is not even sure he wants to leave this life, despite his boyhood dreams of a grander life. But he knows what it is to feel

trapped by expectations that were never spoken aloud, only assumed.

He thinks of the life he once imagined for himself. Something with silk-lined halls, polished speech, being *noticed* for refinement rather than reliability. Noble things. He thinks of how carefully he sets tankards now, how proud he feels when accounts balance, how when a patron will make comments here and there that the tavern almost feels like a noble house because of how Eliam decorates it, how small and stubborn his satisfactions have become.

He thinks of Jonas once more, of how much he failed to shield him when they were boys, of how protection given too late always feels like a kind of theft. Eliam cannot even secure his own footing. He had no right to imagine himself a guardian to anyone else. And yet he keeps imagining it, over and over, as if rehearsal alone might make him capable.

And then parenthood looms in the same shape as the banner did, something too large, too public, demanding an answer he does not yet have. He wonders, with a flash of shame, whether the men shouting by the well are braver than he is, or merely louder.

He does not know whether he wants to stand.

He does not know whether he wants to be allowed to leave.

He knows only that drifting terrifies him more than either.

What he wants, if he is honest— if he strips the thought of its polish and its pretence— is not freedom in the way the Compact names it. It is not command. It is not even safety, exactly.

It is to be held in place.

The realization does not arrive cleanly. It wavers, retracts, tries on better language. Direction. Certainty. A firm hand on his shoulder when he begins to spiral into useless considerations. Someone strong enough to tell him where he belongs, and patient enough to let him argue before insisting anyway.

Lina moves ahead of him through the crowd, unhurried and certain of her path.

Eliam follows, half a step behind, as he always does— Comforted by the shape of her certainty, unsettled by how easily he yields to it, and not yet brave enough to ask himself whether yielding might be the thing he has been reaching for all along.

The farther Eliam gets from the square, the easier his shoulders sit.

The streets thin as the stalls give way to shops with proper doors and windows, places that smell less like crushed herbs and river water and more like wool, starch, and dust warmed by sun through glass. The tension drains from him in increments he doesn't quite notice until he catches himself humming softly, under his breath, something tuneless and familiar.

He adjusts the basket on his arm. Onions nested against apples, salt wrapped carefully in cloth, the fish already given over to Lina's keeping. This errand, at least, is his alone.

The textile shop sits a little apart from the square, as it always has, a

long, narrow building set back from the busiest foot traffic. Its tall front windows are crowded with bolts of fabric displayed like offerings: Linen in shades of bone and cream, soft greys stacked with care, dyed wool folded thick and orderly in colours meant to warm rather than dazzle. A hand-painted sign swings gently above the door — *Harrow & Weft, Fine Clothiers*— the lettering faded at the edges but lovingly retouched every spring, the flourishes steadied rather than replaced.

He is halfway through composing a suitably gracious greeting for Mistress Harrow when he hears laughter inside.

Eliam's mouth curves upward before he can stop it.

He pushes the door open with his shoulder, the bell chiming bright and clear.

Warmth rushes out to meet him. Wool and dye and clean soap. The quiet heat of banked coals, the familiar rustle of fabric being handled by people who know how to touch it properly. Light spills across the counters from the tall windows, softened by hanging skeins and half-drawn curtains, turning the shop into a small, orderly haven where nothing is shouted and everything has its place.

"Greetings and salutations, friends," Eliam says, spreading his free hand a fraction wider than necessary, "I see the day has found you industrious and in excellent spirits."

There is a beat, then laughter, fond and immediate.

"Gods, he's at it again," Says Thom Pell, grinning as he turns from the counter, "Morning to you too, Eliam."

Thom looks much the same as he always has. Clean-shaven, neatly presented, with the comfortable ease of someone who knows exactly where he belongs. His hair is dark and kept short, curling slightly at the ends no matter how often he trims it back. His face is open and expressive, all quick smiles and raised brows, the sort of man who makes friends without meaning to and never quite understands why people like him so much.

His sleeves are rolled to the elbow, forearms dusted faintly with tailor's chalk, and there is a length of blue wool draped over one arm. A measuring tape hangs around his neck like a badge of office. He stands easily in the space, as though the shop has learned his shape through repetition.

They are close in age, close enough that Eliam remembers arriving in Wayrest newly married and entirely unprepared, and finding Thom already there, younger than most of the staff but competent, unflappable, and kind. Thom had been domestic help then, assigned to the inn kitchens and back rooms, and he had become, without ever naming it, a lifeline. Someone who showed Eliam how to keep the inn clean and how to cook its recipes.

A year later, Thom married Mara Pell. And as is routine for male domestic help, one Eliam has become very familiar with over the years, he left paid work to keep his wife's home. A quiet understanding that this was how things went, that a man found his place through attachment and service, not from ambition and certainly *not* from holding banners at market squares.

Thom had taken to married life with an ease that still faintly astonished Eliam. All of his friends had, really. Settling in. Folding themselves neatly into the shapes made for them. Eliam tells himself this is proof that the system works, that the men at the well are simply stirring trouble where none is needed.

But his thoughts remain unwelcome and persistent, that some fits are simpler than others, and that difficulty does not always mean ingratitude. He does not say this aloud. A man ought not complain when he has been kept. He has learned that much, if nothing else.

“Lina let you loose?” Thom asks.

“Temporarily,” Eliam replies, “We are provisioning. I have been entrusted with thread and trim, a responsibility I bear with appropriate solemnity.”

“You look very solemn,” Thom agrees, entirely straight-faced.

Near the window, another friend named Joren lifts his head at the sound of Eliam’s voice, fingers pausing in their careful work. He has a half-finished sleeve laid neatly across his lap, pins glinting like small stars along the seam.

Joren is spare where Thom is rounded. Long-limbed, narrow-hipped, with a face made of clean lines rather than softness. His hair is a pale brown, worn longer than fashion but always clean, tied back loosely at the nape of his neck with a plain cord. A few strands have escaped and fallen forward, brushing his temples when he bends over his work.

His eyes are light— grey or washed blue, difficult to pin down. He wears a simple linen shirt and dark trousers, well-kept and practical, mended with care but never fussed over. He smiles when he sees Eliam.

“You’re late,” Joren says mildly.

“Fashion waits for no man,” Eliam says, “But I regret the delay all the same.”

Joren snorts, short and quiet. He has never indulged Eliam’s flourishes, but neither has he mocked them. There is something grounding about him— about the way he sits, the way his hands return to their work without hurry— that steadies the others without effort.

Beside him, leaning lightly on his cane, is Silas.

Silas turns his head toward the door, listening rather than looking, and his smile arrives a heartbeat later, perfectly timed. His hair is dark and kept neatly cropped, his face clean-shaven like the rest of them and expressive. His features are sharp with high cheekbones and a narrow nose. The cane is polished smooth by use rather than ornament, resting easily in his grip. He wears a well-cut jacket in a muted, practical colour; his clothing is picked out by his wife given his lack of sight.

Silas is the eldest of them by a few years, blind since childhood from an illness no one remembers clearly anymore. His eyes are clouded pale grey, unfocused, but his hands are precise to the point of witchcraft. He can tell wool from linen from silk by touch alone, can judge tension in a seam better than most sighted tailors. The cane is more courtesy than necessity indoors; he knows this shop as well as he knows his own kitchen.

“There you are,” He says, “I was beginning to think the onions had staged a rebellion.”

Eliam replies with mock severity, “They tried, I subdued them.”

Silas laughs, a low, easy sound. He taps his cane once against the floor then angles it aside and steps closer, fingers brushing the basket with practiced confidence. His movements are assured, unhesitating, and Eliam has always admired that about him: How little Silas apologizes for the space he occupies, how calmly the world seems to adjust itself around him despite having what others would call an obvious imperfection.

Standing among them, Eliam feels the last residue of the square loosen its hold.

“Did you bring the samples?” Silas asks.

Eliam brightens, “Of course,” He sets the basket down with care and reaches inside, producing a folded bundle of fabric swatches tied with ribbon, “For our consideration.”

“For our gathering,” Thom says, arching a brow.

“For our *salon,”* Eliam corrects, mildly offended, “I take gatherings very seriously.”

“You take ribbons very seriously,” Joren says, peering at the bow.

“They prevent chaos. And signal intent.”

Silas smiles faintly and reaches forward, fingers brushing the edge of one swatch. He rubs the fabric between thumb and forefinger, attentive in a way that never quite looks like concentration until you know him, “He’s not wrong.”

Encouraged, Eliam unfolds the swatches with deliberate slowness, laying them out across the counter as though arranging a chart—Edges squared, colours balanced, nothing left to chance.

“Now. We have wool, linen, and something daring.”

“Daring,” Thom echoes, “In beige.”

“It’s *oatmeal,”* Eliam says crisply, “With ambition.”

Joren glances up from the bolts, “You served tea in porcelain cups last time.”

“Borrowed porcelain. And only because the mood demanded it.”

“The mood,” Thom repeats.

“Yes,” Eliam says firmly, “The mood.”

Silas reaches out to brush his fingers against another swatch, “This one’s soft.”

“For listening,” Eliam says at once.

Joren snorts, “The fabric listens now?”

“If you speak properly to it.”

Thom folds his arms, “And what, precisely, are we listening *about?”*

Eliam considers, “Current affairs. Modest aspirations. Personal disappointments framed as wit.”

Silas hums, “Very us.”

Eliam smiles, pleased.

Mistress Harrow clears her throat from behind the counter, lips twitching, “If you’re quite done performing,” She says dryly, “Eliam can tell me what he wants before you all redecorate my shop.”

Eliam bows to her, too deeply by half.

“My apologies,” He says, “We are merely convening minds.”

She waves him off, “Thread’s on the left. Buttons in the back. Don’t mix the trays this time.”

“No promises,” Eliam says cheerfully.

They migrate toward the long table near the back, its surface scarred from decades of cutting and measuring. Thom sets his wool aside and

leans back against the edge, comfortable in the space. Joren gathers his pins and Silas navigates around the table without hesitation, cane hooked neatly beneath, fingers trailing the edge until he finds his chair.

Eliam feels it then, that easing and settling sensation.

Thom has his sleeves rolled, forearms dusted faintly with chalk. He moves with the easy confidence of someone who knows exactly what is expected of him and has long since made peace with it. Joren sits with his half-finished sleeve laid carefully across his lap, expression mild. Silas's hands are already busy again, mapping the fabric with a familiarity that speaks of repetition.

None of them blink when Eliam insists on symmetry. None of them laugh when he calls their afternoons *occasions,* his usage of flowery language, or when he fusses over ribbon width and stitch length. If anything, they indulge him. Thom with open amusement, Joren with dry tolerance, Silas with quiet agreement.

They understand the simple pleasure of it.

They compare textures and shades of various fabrics to the swatches Eliam brought. He lingers over anything with a hint of pattern— herringbone that almost aligns, brocade threads too ambitious for their base cloth— already imagining how it might be coaxed into something finer than it truly is. His homemade garments have a habit of reaching a little too far. Cuffs that echo noble cuts but sit slightly wrong at the wrist, linings that don't quite agree with the outer fabric, embellishments chosen for their intention rather than their harmony. Handmade finery, earnest and obvious to anyone who knows what to look for.

His friends never comment on that, either. They help him weigh

thread against cloth, nod thoughtfully at trims that promise more than they can deliver, and gently steer him away from combinations that would announce their ambition too loudly.

So,” Thom says, tone casual in the way that means it isn’t, “Did you see them?”

Eliam knows exactly who he means.

He hesitates, just long enough to be telling, then lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug that does not quite succeed at nonchalance, “If you mean the gentlemen cultivating facial hair in open defiance of decency, then yes. Briefly.”

“They’re back?” Joren asks.

“They never really leave,” Thom says, “They just migrate. Like geese. Loud, inconvenient geese.”

Joren’s mouth curves, “Geese are useful. Those men mostly just shout.”

“They weren’t shouting,” Eliam says, then winces inwardly at himself. Too quick. All three of his friends look at him.

“Well,” Thom allows, “That’s a ringing endorsement.”

“I’m only saying,” Eliam continues, smoothing an invisible crease in the air, “That they were… measured. More so than last year.”

“Last year they blocked the well,” Joren says, “That’s not difficult to improve upon.”

Silas tilts his head, “What were they asking for this time?”

Eliam opens his mouth, then falters. The words from the square crowd back in— Ownership, continuity, the right to leave without being ruined.

“The usual,” He says instead.

“Ah,” Thom says, nodding as if that explains everything, “Homes. Deeds. The right to stride about as if the world owes them applause.”

“And divorce,” Eliam adds before he can stop himself.

That earns him a pause.

Joren frowns slightly, his voice coming out scandalized, *“Divorce?”*

“They want the right to petition for it. Independently.”

Thom laughs, a short, incredulous bark, “Why?”

The simplicity of the question hits harder than the shouting ever did.

Silas doesn't laugh. He doesn't speak either, but his fingers still on the cloth.

Eliam gestures vaguely, "Unhappy marriages. Being… trapped."

"Trapped?" Thom repeats, genuinely puzzled, "In a household where you're fed and clothed and looked after? Where someone else carries the weight of the world so you don't have to?"

Joren hums agreement, fingers busy with a spool, "That's not being trapped. That's being settled. Men mistake restlessness for injustice. If it's bad enough that a woman divorces a man, his reputation's ruined anyway. Everyone knows that. People assume he failed. Or worse." He shrugs, "Why would anyone choose that?"

Eliam nods, because that is the correct response. The sensible one. The one he has offered before, in other rooms, with more confidence than he feels now.

And because, on the surface of it, he agrees.

Marriage *does* keep men from drifting. From making spectacles of themselves. From ending up unmoored and dependent on charity. It gives shape. It gives purpose. A man without a household is a problem waiting to happen.

Silas turns his face toward him, "Did they say anything else?" He asks gently.

“They said,” Eliam replies, choosing his words with care, “That if a woman can leave a marriage, a man should be able to leave one that erodes him.”

Thom lets out a short laugh, “Erodes him? That’s dramatic.”

“Men erode all on their own,” Joren says dryly, “Marriage just slows it down. Gives us rails to hold onto.”

Eliam smiles faintly. He has said things like that himself. Has believed them, too, especially when read in publications like the *Genteel Standard.* That men need structure the way poorly built houses need braces. That without guidance, they sag, split, collapse.

Silas is quiet for a moment before he speaks again, “They’re not wrong that some marriages are cruel.”

Thom turns toward him at once, “Yours isn’t.”

“No,” Silas agrees easily, “Mine is not.”

At that, Eliam thinks of Silas’s wife without meaning to. She is a solid, capable woman, a few years older than Silas, with a voice that carries warmth before it carries sound. She laughs easily, the kind of laugh that fills a doorway as she enters it, already reaching for her husband as if it is the most natural thing in the world to locate him first. Her hand finds his shoulder or the small of his back in passing, never possessive, always anchoring.

She smells faintly of dye and clean water, sleeves often pushed up, hair pinned back in a way that suggests habit rather than vanity.

When she sits to read in the evenings, she does so with an unselfconscious pleasure, legs crossed, book balanced easily in one hand while the other rests on Silas's knee or threads through his fingers.

She reads him adventure stories. Court scandals. Once, a serialized melodrama that had Eliam blushing into his teacup while Silas listened with serene delight, head tilted toward her voice as though nothing else in the room quite mattered.

She adores him.

The knowledge settles warmly, like a stone dropped into a pond that smooths the ripples instead of making them.

"No," Eliam murmurs softly, "Yours is… exemplary."

Silas smiles, unembarrassed, "It is."

Of course Silas's marriage is not cruel.

Of course most aren't. Marriages like Silas's proves society as it is works— *sometimes.* And sometimes has always been enough to quiet arguments like those spouted by the Whiskered Compact.

Of course the men shouting in the square are exceptions. Outliers. Difficult men, asking difficult questions when the rest of them have learned how to be grateful.

And yet the words *erodes him* cling stubbornly to the back of Eliam's thoughts, rubbing raw against things he has never quite known how to name.

Thom waves a hand, "That's the thing, isn't it? The men shouting in the square— Most of them aren't like us. They're restless. Dissatisfied. Always wanting something else. Those types will never be satisfied. What's next? Demanding to lead the entire country? Just imagine."

Eliam flinches, almost imperceptibly.

Joren hums in agreement, already turning the conversation sideways into something drier and less charged, speculation about whether guards would tolerate another banner, whether the well would need moving if protests grew louder. Their voices overlap, comfortable and dismissive in the way of men who have already decided where they stand.

Eliam, meanwhile, thinks of the banner. Of the words *"We don't ask to rule. Only to remain."*

Remain *where?* The question opens quietly in his chest and does not close again.

Jonas rises to mind without invitation. Jonas as a boy— Shoulders tucked inward, hands folded tight, words caught before they ever reached his mouth. Jonas, who learned early that attention was dangerous, that the safest place to exist was just outside of notice. Jonas, sent away young, not because he was unwanted, but because his family had been afraid of what would happen if he stayed.

Then Eliam thinks of Silas beside him now.

He does not mean the comparison unkindly. He would never think of Silas as lesser. And yet the difference is undeniable. Silas moves through the world with a certainty that Jonas has never been afforded. He is greeted by name. Touched without hesitation. Spoken to without careful simplification. His blindness is acknowledged, accommodated and then, crucially, set aside.

If a blind man can be cherished so openly, so completely, then why was Jonas not granted the same grace?

The question needles him, sharp and unwelcome.

Because Jonas stuttered. Because Jonas made people uncomfortable.

Or perhaps Silas was simply fortunate. Fortunate to be born in a town that did not care, fortunate to be met first with patience instead of correction. Eliam had told himself, once, that Wayrest might be good for Jonas. That here, even a visible imperfection did not seem to disqualify a man from comfort, from being wanted. That a match with Lina's cousin would have been practical. Sensible. Not, perhaps, as self-serving as it truly was.

Eliam swallows.

Beside him, Silas's fingers pause on the fabric, sensing the shift long before Eliam speaks. He does not interrupt Thom and Joren. He does not draw attention. He simply turns his head slightly, an adjustment so small it might go unnoticed by anyone else.

"They didn't sound like men who wanted to rule," Silas says quietly, not to the group, but to Eliam alone.

Eliam startles, just a little.

“No,” He admits, just as softly. The words slip out before he can polish them, “I don’t think they did.”

Silas waits.

“I think,” Eliam continues, after a moment, “That they’re afraid of being… misplaced.”

The word feels dangerous once spoken. It lingers between them, exposed.

Silas nods once, “Most people are. They just use different names for it.”

Thom glances over, “What’s this?”

“Nothing of consequence,” Eliam says quickly, smoothing his expression into something lighter, “Merely idle reflection.”

“You sound like a pamphlet,” Joren remarks, amused.

“I take that as a compliment,” Eliam replies automatically.

They chuckle and return to their conversation, already moving on.

Silas does not.

“Are you worried about it?” He asks, gently.

Eliam laughs, too quickly to be entirely convincing, “Goodness, no. I am impeccably placed.”

Silas’s mouth curves, faint and knowing. He does not contradict him. He does not agree either.

“You worry,” Silas says instead, “That’s all.”

Eliam nods, relieved at the shape of it. Worry is safe. Worry is respectable. Worry does not demand action.

He worries about Lina. About the inn, about whether he is pulling his weight properly, about whether his usefulness will someday be measured and found wanting. He worries about children he is not sure he wants and fears he may desperately try to earn anyway, simply to prove that he deserves the life he has been given.

And he keeps worrying about Jonas.

About the estate. About Branwen, whom he knows only through letters and reputation and a handful of meetings coloured too heavily by his own unease. What if she tires of Jonas? What if the protection Eliam imagines there is more fragile than it appears? What if something goes wrong and Jonas has nowhere to go?

Can Eliam be a safety net when he himself does not feel securely anchored?

The thought circles, entirely unpleasant. Silas's wife would never let him be displaced. Eliam knows that with an aching certainty. Lina would never abandon him either, but that knowledge is different. Practical. Unspoken. Held together by routine and obligation rather than tenderness.

Is that enough?

"Eliam," Silas says, snapping his fingers lightly near the table. There is no sharpness in it, only familiarity. Despite his unseeing eyes, he has always been the first to notice when someone leaves the room without moving, "You've gone miles away again."

Eliam blinks and realizes he has been staring at a single length of thread for far too long.

"My apologies," He says smoothly, "I was… contemplating."

Joren smirks, "Dangerous pastime."

"Necessary," Eliam counters, straightening, letting the familiar cadence return, "A man who does not reflect risks becoming dreadfully dull."

Silas leans in slightly, "Are you alright?"

Eliam beams at him, radiant and rehearsed, “Perfect. Never better.”

His friends exchange a look, unconvinced but kind enough not to press.

The cloth waits. The needles gleam.

And Eliam, for now, settles back into the comfort of familiar rituals, his worries folded neatly away, even as they press against him from the inside— Patient, unresolved, and very much alive.

Evening settles over the inn in layers, the few off-season guests drifting upstairs, the common room dimmed to a low, amber hum, the day’s noise folding itself away. Eliam moves through it with practiced ease, sleeves rolled, hair neatly tied back with a ribbon he will later pretend not to care about.

He wipes down the small table near the window first, smoothing away rings left by careless tankards. He pauses when the surface catches the light just so, inclines his head a fraction— as if acknowledging a job well received— and then, faintly amused with himself, corrects the alignment of the chair by half an inch. The chair is stubborn. He gives it a look of mild reproach before nudging it into compliance.

Then the counter, then the hearth ledge, aligning the little details that make a place feel held together rather than merely occupied. He lifts the broom from where it leans against the wall and, without quite realizing he’s doing it, gives a shallow, impeccable bow before setting it to work. The gesture is precise, unconscious, and entirely unnecessary. The broom does not deserve it. That has never stopped

him.

Lina is upstairs, finishing accounts with the door ajar. He can hear the faint scratch of her pen, the occasional soft huff of irritation. She likes her tea brought to her. He likes to bring it.

In the back room, he sets the kettle on and measures leaves with care. Two cups. He hums under his breath as the water heats, something tuneless and comforting. When the kettle begins to murmur, he places a hand on its lid as if soothing it, murmuring, “Patience,” in a tone more suited to an unruly page than a piece of cookware.

The basket from earlier sits on the bench, newly acquired fabrics folded inside. He pauses to check them again, unable to resist. He lays one length out against the table, frowns thoughtfully, folds it back. The colours are… ambitious. He lifts another, drapes it briefly over his forearm, assessing its weight with the seriousness of a court tailor fitting a duke. For a moment, he imagines it transformed into a structured and disciplined garment, made by his hands. He exhales, faintly pleased.

He tells himself they will look better once stitched, once structured. They always do. Or at least, that’s what he tells himself.

And if, in the quiet of the closed inn, he straightens a sack of flour and murmurs an approving title under his breath, if he smooths its top as though it were silk rather than coarse linen… Well. There is no audience. Only the work, the rhythm, and the small, private delight of doing things *properly,* even when no one is watching.

In the midst of his self-amused flourishes, a letter waits where he left it, propped neatly beside the teapot. Jonas’s hand, unmistakable even before he opens it. His brother’s writing is careful, slightly uneven, and almost too earnest. Eliam hesitates, fingers resting on the seal, as

if the contents might shift if he gives them a moment longer.

The kettle whistles. He pours, sets the cups on a tray, adds a small dish of honey. Then, finally, he opens the letter and begins to read as the inn breathes quietly around him, the day giving way to night.

Eliam ends up reading the letter twice.

Jonas's hand is steadier than it once was, the lines more confident. He writes of the estate in careful, affectionate detail, of work that tires him but does not hollow him out, of Branwen's gruff attentiveness, of the way the seasons feel sharper now that they have a cottage for themselves. He says they hope to visit when they can. That Branwen wants to see the inn properly, not just hear about it secondhand. That time off for a Hunting Marshal is unpredictable, and Jonas is careful not to promise what he cannot guarantee, but the wanting is there, bright and unmistakable.

I want you two to get to know each other properly, Jonas writes. *Branwen pretends not to care what people think, but she does. Just… differently.*

Eliam folds the letter with precise care and presses it briefly to the table before setting it aside. The ache comes, soft and familiar, just the quiet wish to have his brother near enough to look at, to confirm with his own eyes that all is truly as well as Jonas claims.

Still. He smiles. Jonas has a cottage. It's a work in progress, but his brother has… done well for himself, Eliam's worries aside. Even if he still feels the compulsion to go back and see him again, to keep him close so that selfishly he may feel more anchored.

He carries the tray upstairs, nudges the door open with his hip. Lina looks up from her papers as he enters, expression easing at the sight of

the teacups.

“You spoil me,” She says, reaching for one.

“Ruthlessly,” Eliam agrees, setting the tray down. He pours, adds honey to hers without asking because that is what a husband does, “Jonas wrote.”

“Oh?” She sits back, interest piqued, “The solemn one lives on.”

“He hopes to visit. With the Hunting Marshal, Branwen. At some point. When duties allow.”

Lina hums, “That’ll be a sight. I should warn my cousin.”

Eliam pauses as he settles into the bed and cup halfway to his lips.

“She thought she might be meeting your quiet, unattached brother someday,” Lina continues, “Now I’ve had to explain he’s a kept man with a formidable woman attached. She’s wondering if there’s something wrong with her.”

“That seems… unfairly framed,” Eliam says weakly.

Lina sips her tea, “I told her it wasn’t personal. Just fate, forests, and intimidating women. She took it well. Mostly.”

Eliam clears his throat, “Jonas would think very highly of you.”

“Would he.”

“Yes. Absolutely. Without question,” He hesitates, then adds, “In principle.”

“In practice?” She prompts.

Eliam smiles too quickly, “I may have… emphasized your standards in my letters to him.”

“Ah.”

“And your managerial efficiency.”

“Mm.”

“And your commitment to order.”

Lina leans back in her chair, studying him, “Did you tell him I make you paint shutters?”

“Only affectionately.”

“Did you tell him I won’t let you mark Hearthurn in the common room?”

“I framed it as cultural divergence.”

“And the rooster remark?”

Eliam winces, “That may have been paraphrased.”

Lina chuckles, “So your brother thinks I’m a joyless tyrant with no appreciation for wreaths.”

“A respected tyrant,” Eliam offers, “With strong opinions.”

Lina gives a noncommittal hum. She gathers the last of her papers into a neat stack, squares the edges against the table with practiced efficiency, and slides them into the drawer beneath. The lamp is turned down. The room softens. She lifts her teacup, takes another sip, then moves toward the bed. Eliam is propped against the pillows, hands folded loosely in his lap and his teacup placed on his bedside table, the familiar posture of someone waiting to be told what comes next. The mattress dips as Lina sits beside him and she reaches out, fingers brushing his arm, then resting there.

“Next letter, you may mention that I keep you fed, clothed, and relatively unruined.”

Eliam finds himself focusing on her touch on his arm. They have shared a bed for years. They have shared bodies, obligations, the quiet choreography of a marriage that functions even when it does not burn. He knows the shape of her touch, the expectation it carries. It is not—*Unwelcome,* but neither is it simple.

Something tightens in him all the same. Not fear, exactly. More a reflexive unease, the old apprehension surfacing unbidden. Of what closeness might ask of him. Of what it might lead to. Of futures implied rather than spoken.

“I have always implied that,” Eliam replies meekly.

“Eliam.”

“Yes, Lina?”

“Does your brother like me?”

“He hasn’t met you. But I think, given the chance, he would.”

Lina seems satisfied with that. She lifts her cup again, letting the steam curl between them, and the room settles into its usual evening cadence. The soft clink of porcelain. The warmth of the tea. The practiced ease of a life arranged to run smoothly.

Eliam lets himself breathe into it, and that is when the old question slips back in.

Not sharply. Not all at once. It drifts up on the same current as his unease, carried by the same quiet dread he never quite names. The weight of expectation. The certainty that intimacy is never only about the present.

“H–how about you… D–do you… l–l–love Lina?”

Jonas's voice, careful and earnest, returns to him with uncomfortable clarity. The way the question had landed between them, tentative but direct. The way Eliam had gone still, as though bracing for something he had no intention of answering. He remembers how quickly he had laughed then. Too quickly. The reflexive brightness, the little flourish of his hand, all polish and evasion.

"Oh— well. I mean. We're married."

Not an answer. Never an answer.

The memory lingers now as he reaches for his tea, as he watches Lina cradle her cup, her movements familiar enough to be almost invisible. He is ashamed to feel something akin to relief when the hand on his arm moves away. He thinks of how easily one thing follows another. How nights like this lead to obligations fulfilled, to the quiet arithmetic of duty, and sometimes, if fortune or carelessness allows, to children.

The thought tightens something low in his chest.

Lina tilts her head, studying him over the rim of her tea as she says his name again, "Eliam."

He startles, pulled back into the room, "Yes?"

"If you were unhappy," She says, plainly, without softness or cruelty, as though stating a fact she has already balanced on all sides, "And if the law allowed you to divorce me… would you?"

The words land with the weight of inevitability. The Whiskered Compact, pressing its way even here, into the bed they share. Heat floods his face. His mouth opens, then closes again, breath catching as the careful order he relies on wavers— just slightly— under the force of being asked, at last, to speak plainly.

And he panics.

This is not something he has rehearsed. This is not the safe, measured theatre he has constructed for the day, nor the careful letter-writing to Jonas. This is real, immediate, and it strikes at the heart of every carefully folded thought he has kept tucked away.

He swallows, and nearly reaches for his cup before deciding against it. The teacups are innocuous, simple, ordinary— But in that ordinary space, the question hangs, sharp and unyielding.

Eliam's mind races, darting to Jonas, to the estate, to the Whiskered Compact's shadow over every man who dares to dream of independence. He thinks of the careful balance of his own life, of the structure that Lina provides, of the domestic safety that keeps him anchored. And yet, the idea that he could choose… that he could act on dissatisfaction… it is foreign, terrifying, and almost impossible to bear in that quiet moment.

He blinks hard and forces a calmness into his posture that feels brittle even to him. "N—no," He says firmly, voice just a touch too quick, "I would… never dream of such a thing!"

Lina lifts an eyebrow, tilting her cup, "Good to hear," She says lightly, though her eyes track him with the sort of precision that leaves no room for evasion.

He clears his throat, the flush in his cheeks stubbornly persistent.

“It’s absurd, o–of course! That compact… I do not… I do not agree with it, not really. It’s…” His hands flutter briefly, his face contorted with nervous energy, “…mostly academic.”

She looks at him for a moment, unimpressed, “Hmm. Academic, is it?”

“Yes. Entirely theoretical,” He forces a smile, brittle at the edges, “Men airing grievances. Nothing more.”

She lowers the cup.

Lina simply continues looking at him, and Eliam becomes acutely aware of himself. Of the tightness in his shoulders, the way his fingers won’t quite still, the faint crease between his brows that no amount of careful posture has smoothed away. He has not been subtle. Whatever storm he has been carrying has clearly been visible to anyone paying attention.

Lina sets her cup aside and leans forward, elbows resting lightly on her knees. Her voice, when she speaks, is neither sharp nor indulgent.

“I know there is something wrong. So what is it?”

The question opens him like a blade.

“I—I’m…” He swallows, the words tumbling out before he can arrange them properly, “I’m more concerned with… continuity… With what

would happen if— if something were to happen to you. To the inn. To everything you've built."

He winces, aware of how it sounds even as he continues.

"The Whiskered Compact," He says, quieter now, "It *did* make me think. Men can't— can't hold property. If you were gone, I would… I would become a ward. Or dependent upon one of your relatives. I would be…" He trails off to a mumble, "…misplaced."

Lina fixes him with a look so flat it feels heavier than any raised voice.

"Eliam."

He freezes, caught mid-breath.

"Do I look like I'm dying?" She asks calmly.

The question lands with surgical precision.

A fresh wave of heat floods his face, "N—no. Of course not. I only meant—"

She doesn't let him scramble further. She sits back, "I am quite alive. Entirely unconcerned with wills, wards, or being mourned prematurely."

A beat.

“And I would prefer not to hear my own demise rehearsed over evening tea.”

Eliam exhales, some of the tension finally draining from his shoulders. The words are out now, and she has not scolded him. Has not laughed. Her calm only sharpens the absurdity of how tightly he has been wound.

“I… suppose,” He murmurs, trying for an abashed smile, “I may need to adjust my… parameters. To remember that you are—” He gestures weakly, encompassing her, the bed, the room, the life they occupy, “—exactly where you are. And that I am not required to anticipate catastrophe at every turn.”

Lina’s mouth curves faintly, “See? Not so terrifying when you say it plainly.”

He lets out a nervous laugh, “Plainness is… not my strongest suit.”

“No, it really isn’t. You’d be exhausted before the kettle ever whistles if you tried to be plain.”

The quiet that follows is not entirely uncomfortable. The room settles again. The storm has not passed, but it has at least been named. Lina glances at him steadily and Eliam feels the apprehension return in full force, especially when she speaks again.

“We have been wed for years. We were not married for love. I understand that you were… quite young and I was a fair bit older than you when you took my name. There are many unions like ours and most of them function perfectly well.”

She pauses, letting that land.

“If I want children someday, I would rather not have you miserable. I can wait. We have time,” Her gaze sharpens, just slightly, “But I need to know how you intend to stand beside me.”

Eliam’s pulse quickens again. And it occurs to him, with a clarity that leaves him almost lightheaded:

He has never been entirely honest about his unhappiness.

The silent truth sits between them, unadorned. And for the first time, he sees the marriage as Lina does, not as a romance or grandness he wished for in boyhood, but as a structure he has been given to navigate and inhabit.

“What would make this easier for you?” Lina asks, and the question hangs in the quiet.

Eliam’s first instinct is panic. Not because the question is sharp— Lina is careful with him, always— but because it is open. It offers no rails. No shape. He feels himself reach for something rehearsed and come up empty-handed. Eliam cannot arrive at an answer prepared, or even certain that what he wants has a name. It begins, as many of his confessions do, halfway through a sentence, spoken too carefully, as though the wrong phrasing might collapse the entire thought.

“Stability. I… I think I need stability. In my days, in my duties. In knowing what is mine to do, and when I may simply… be,” He hears the faint lift at the end of the sentence and hates it, hates the way it sounds like a question rather than a statement. He presses on before

Lina can respond, “I think I need… fewer variables. Fewer chances to be wrong without knowing it.”

He can feel his pulse in his throat now, that quick, eager beat that always accompanies the sense that he is *almost* saying something important but might miss it if he blinks.

“Stability,” Lina repeats, brows furrowing, “I’m not sure I understand.”

That should make him stop. Instead, it loosens something.

“Stability in the household. In how I’m expected to be,” His hands twist together in his lap, fingers worrying at each other without his permission. He keeps his gaze fixed somewhere between her shoulder and the headboard as his lowers without his meaning it to, sliding into the register he uses for admissions he has rehearsed privately and never shared, “I think I do better when things are firmer. When the margins are narrower.”

Lina does not interrupt. She watches him with that steady, appraising attention she usually reserves for a ledger that is not quite balancing. Her mouth is neutral. Her eyes, however, flick between his face and his hands, tracking the tension there.

“So you want clearer expectations?”

“Yes,” He says too quickly, then forces himself to slow, “I want fewer places to misstep. Fewer moments where I have to trust my own judgement.”

The words land with more weight than he expects. Saying them aloud

makes him aware of how much effort he spends trying to be correct without confirmation, how much he performs both for a yearning of a grander life but also because he thinks it's just the *right* way to act.

Lina shifts again, propping herself on one elbow now. The movement creases the bedding; Eliam's attention snags on it, then skids away, embarrassed by how attuned he feels to her responses.

"You're… You're asking me to be stricter with you?"

"...Yes, Lina. I— I think I am."

She gives him a once-over, then exhales, more puzzled than resistant. Then, dry as dust, she says, "You *do* realize that I already tell you what to do, correct?"

Eliam blinks.

"I remind you to eat when you forget," She continues, counting them off quietly, practical as ever, "I tell you when you're fussing over nothing. I stop you when you're running yourself into the ground. I've taken things out of your hands and told you to leave them be," Her mouth quirks faintly, "Hence why your brother likely thinks I'm a joyless tyrant, given what you seemingly write to him."

As she speaks, he feels an odd mix of heat and relief bloom under his ribs. Eliam feels a fresh wave of heat hit his cheeks, especially when Lina leans forward slightly, intent but not imposing. A jolt runs up his spine, not entirely dissimilar to when they first shared a bed together after their wedding.

“Are you saying you want more of that?”

The question is not sharp. It is genuinely curious.

Eliam hadn’t framed it that way, not even to himself.

“I—” He hesitates, fingers twisting together again in his lap, the nervous energy suddenly too large for his body. He can feel the words crowding behind his teeth, “Y—yes. I think… yes.”

Lina stares at him. Just… still. Her gaze moves over him again, slower this time, as if she’s looking for something she’s missed. His posture. His expression. The way he’s practically vibrating with contained urgency. Then, unexpectedly, she lets out a quiet huff of amusement. A faint release of air that signals recalibration.

“You want me to be stricter. You realize that many men would chafe under that. There is an entire collective very much against it.”

Eliam manages a small, rueful smile, “I… have noticed.” The smile falters, then steadies as he adds, more softly, “I think I’m asking,” He says, choosing each word with care, “For fewer places to fall.”

The admission leaves him oddly bare. He stares at the coverlet, waiting for it to sound foolish once spoken aloud. Waiting for Lina to name it as such. Instead, Eliam can see there is something visibly unresolved in her expression, a faint crease between her brows that suggests she is mapping this request against her own instincts and coming up short.

Despite that, she says, “All right. We can try… firmer expectations.”

Relief flickers across his expression before he can hide it. It is immediate, almost embarrassing in its intensity.

“We’ll see where it goes then,” She says but still gives an air of uncertainty. Then she settles back against the pillows, thoughtful rather than alarmed.

Eliam lets out a quiet breath, not entirely sure what they’ve agreed to — But certain, for the first time in a while, that the ground beneath him feels a little steadier.

Morning arrives without ceremony.

Eliam wakes and shaves quickly, later than he would like, and stands still for a moment, cataloguing his failures before they can multiply. The light is already grey at the edges of the curtains. He notes the lateness, the faint stiffness in his shoulders, the fact that he did not rise to prepare breakfast as he usually does.

His pulse carries a faint, anticipatory edge.

Downstairs, Lina is already up. The inn smells of yeast and clean wood and yesterday’s smoke. She stands at the counter, sleeves rolled, hair loosely tied back, reading through a stack of papers. Not a ledger, he notices, but invoices. Close enough to order to make his chest tighten pleasantly.

“You’re up late,” She says without looking up.

His stomach drops anyway, “I—”

She glances up, assesses him, then exhales, “Not disastrously. Sit. Eat. Then fix yesterday’s totals.”

The words land with a weight that surprises him. Far from the first time she’s told him to do something, but this— This feels almost like a *command.*

He hesitates, then asks, because he must, “In that order?”

She raises an eyebrow.

“Yes, Eliam. In that order.”

A strange sort of satisfaction flickers through him, sharp and confusing. It is the relief of not having to decide whether the eggs will cool if he checks the numbers first, of not having to weigh propriety against efficiency. He sits. He eats. The plate is already prepared: Eggs, bread, tea poured. Familiar. Ordinarily his work. Today, given.

The given-ness of it makes his throat tighten. But Lina does not watch him closely, and somehow that makes it harder. The absence of scrutiny feels like a test he does not know how to pass, like being told to perform without an audience.

“You’re not watching me,” He says before he can stop himself and immediately wants to bite his tongue off.

“…No, I’m not,” Lina replies, brow creasing, “Eat.”

The simplicity steadies him more than the food does.

When he finishes, he wipes his hands, folds his napkin, and waits. He does not know why he waits, only that it feels correct to do so. His back straightens of its own accord, shoulders setting, as though his body remembers a posture his mind has not consciously adopted yet.

She looks up at him then.

“What are you waiting for?”

“Instruction.”

Eliam sees a twitch in her expression and she almost looks as though she might heave an exasperated sigh.

“Totals. Now,” She says.

“Yes, Lina.”

She corrects him as needed. Not constantly. A tap of the page. A brief instruction. A quiet *“no, there,”* or *“leave that, it balances.”* Each correction arrives cleanly and departs just as cleanly, leaving behind a strange echo. Each one sends a small, anticipatory lift through him, followed by a hollow drop when it ends. The satisfaction never quite

lands. It is like stepping forward and finding no stair.

Once— only once— he finds himself straightening too much as she approaches, chin lifting, shoulders drawing back in an echo of the affectation he uses when speaking in public. It is unconscious and habitual, the more polished version of himself rising to meet attention.

Lina stops short.

“Eliam,” She says mildly.

“Yes?” He freezes, caught halfway between motions.

“Sit like a person, not a portrait.”

Heat rushes to his face. He obeys at once, the posture collapsing into something more ordinary. The correction lands— And vanishes. Too fast. He is left holding the aftermath of it, an unspent charge.

By midmorning, his shoulders have lowered. His movements are quieter and surer. They continue like that for a while. Lina telling him what to do, followed by a correction here and there, and then silence. At some point, he cannot pinpoint when, Eliam begins to want more than what she is giving him.

He does not name it as *wanting*. The reaction to the Whiskered Compact and writings from the *Genteel Standard* make it quite plain that men should not *want*. It feels more like leaning forward instinctively when the room goes quiet, or finishing a sentence with an unnecessary flourish, as if inviting response. Once, when carrying linens upstairs, he murmurs to himself, *“Very well, then,”* in the crisp,

over-articulated tone he uses when imagining himself as steward to a demanding Lady.

He catches himself and flushes.

Lina says nothing. That is almost worse.

Later, Eliam inventories the dry goods in the main room, ledger tucked beneath his arm, pen moving with methodical precision. Sacks of grain. Jars of beans. Strings of onions hanging in orderly loops from their hooks. He arranges them with an eye for symmetry that borders on devotional. He has always loved the look of things set just so. He has, more than once, imagined himself in a noble household where order is not merely practical but aesthetic, where the lines of duty are visible and beautiful.

A regular pauses near the doorway, watching with mild curiosity.

“Didn’t know you handled that,” The woman remarks.

“I do as needed, madam,” Eliam replies politely, not looking up. His voice is careful, properly neutral… And perhaps a touch too refined for the setting.

From behind the bar, Lina’s voice carries, calm and unraised, “That’s enough conversation. Continue.”

The instruction is casual. The effect is not. He turns back to the onions without comment. His pulse jumps, then, unexpectedly, evens out. The woman shrugs and orders her ale. The world does not tilt. No one stares. Nothing is disrupted.

There is a faint, illicit pleasure in being corrected publicly and safely, in having the boundary enforced without drama. It is not the correction itself that steadies him, he realizes dimly, but the certainty of it, the way it closes a door rather than opening a choice.

At noon, Lina assigns him lunch duties.

“You’ll clear the tables. Then sweep.”

“Yes, Lina.”

“And,” She adds, eyes narrowing just slightly, “You will not bow to the broom.”

Heat rushes to his face, “I— I wasn’t going to.”

She gives him a look that suggests she knows him better than that.

He sweeps. He does not bow. He does, however, keep straightening when she passes, spine aligning as if tugged by an invisible string. She pointedly ignores it. It leaves the gesture hanging, unresolved, like a line delivered to the wrong audience.

When he finishes, she inspects the floor with exaggerated seriousness, then nods once.

“Acceptable.”

The word settles over him like a benediction. He feels it in his chest, warm and oddly reverent. *Acceptable* is a word he has chased his entire life. Acceptable to his parents. Acceptable to patrons. Acceptable to the abstract idea of propriety he carries like a measuring stick in his mind.

In the afternoon, she sends him to the laundry. Eliam responds by bowing, the motion automatic and thoughtless, “Yes, Lina.”

She sighs.

Later, as he folds linens with careful precision, Lina pauses in the doorway.

“Eliam.”

“Yes?” He looks up at once.

She is not looking at his hands, or the linens. She is looking at him.

“You respond very strongly to direction,” He must make a face, because she adds, “Just an observation.”

Eliam stills, fingers smoothing the linen one last time before folding his hands together, as if awaiting further instruction. Silence stretches between them. He feels as though he has been caught mid-performance, costume half-donned and lines half-remembered. The part of him that had been leaning forward retreats a fraction.

“I didn’t expect you to… enjoy this, but I can see that you also seem disappointed sometimes. I’m trying, Eliam, but I hope you know I won’t be managing every little aspect of your day.”

He has no reply for that. The truth of it sits too close to something he hasn’t admitted even to himself. He merely nods.

When she leaves, Eliam folds another sheet. The motion steadies him, but his thoughts slip sideways. He imagines, briefly and vividly, what it would be like if the instructions came with ceremony. If they were delivered not as casual efficiency but as something chosen, elevated. If direction arrived with intention and tone, if compliance were not merely useful but *meant*.

He imagines titles. A script he could step into fully rather than brushing against the edges of it by accident. The intensity of the thought startles him. He presses it down at once and returns to the safe geometry of folded linen.

By late afternoon, his body carries the pleasant fatigue of having done exactly what was asked of him and no more. His thoughts are quieter. The constant internal rehearsal has dimmed to a low murmur. There is relief in that.

There is also a restlessness, a sense that something has been *almost* addressed and left unfinished.

“You may stop for tea,” Lina says when he reaches the kitchen to prepare dinner, “Ten minutes.”

He looks up, startled, the pause registering as both permission and

limit, “Only ten?”

“Yes.”

A small smile escapes him, reflexive and oddly pleased. “I’m obliged. Thank you, Lina.”

When he moves towards the kettle, he hears Lina mumble behind him, *“Obliged,* he says.”

They take tea together in the common room. Eliam sits where she tells him to, on the edge of the chair rather than sprawling, hands folded neatly around the cup. He does not speak unless she does first because the silence feels structured. Permitted.

Writing forms the *Genteel Standard* aside, he has always understood silence as a kind of obedience, and obedience as a form of care. He wonders if he might have gotten that from Jonas.

After a moment, Lina speaks, almost cautiously.

“…Is this actually helping?”

“Yes, Lina. Very much.”

She nods, “Good.”

But she does not say *“we’ll continue this tomorrow.”* She does not

outline expectations or define the next step. The lack of it is palpable. He feels it like a missing stair in the dark. Nothing visible, but the certainty that one *ought* to be there.

They're finished for the day. The absence of continued correction feels like a vacuum. He fills it, despite himself, with imagined instructions. He hears her voice in his head, firmer than it was, and more deliberate. He imagines responding with grace, with a bow that is acknowledged rather than ignored, with a posture that means something rather than merely suggesting it.

They go to bed. No more discussion. Lina falls asleep quickly, the easy sleep of someone whose mind does not rehearse itself into knots.

Eliam lies awake, staring at the ceiling.

Something has eased. He cannot deny that. The day had edges. Lines. He did not have to invent them himself. That alone feels like mercy.

Something else has been stirred, and it does not settle so easily.

The glimpses of relief, the moments where instruction landed as something like permission, have awakened a hunger he does not know how to deal with. He thinks of the costumes he has sketched and never sewn, of speeches he practices under his breath when he is alone, of the way he sees noble households turn authority into theatre and theatre into meaning.

He feels less lost.

But he does not feel found.

It happens the next afternoon.

Eliam has just finished arranging the sideboard in the common room. The cups are aligned, handles turned outward in a neat arc. It is more precise than necessary. Lina has long since stopped commenting on that sort of thing.

He smooths his waistcoat and straightens. The posture comes easily to him, practiced over years: Shoulders back, chin lifted just enough to suggest dignity without challenge. He has worn this shape into himself. The town knows it. Lina knows it.

She is at the counter, tallying bottles, murmuring numbers under her breath.

Eliam clears his throat.

“Lina,” He says and already the cadence shifts. His vowels lengthen. The careful, ornamental diction slips into place like a well-loved coat, “The room stands prepared. If further direction is required, I remain at your disposal.”

He means nothing dangerous by it. Not consciously. This is how he often speaks, after all. A pair of patrons sit near the window, quietly drinking. One of them smiles faintly. Eliam’s tone has long since ceased to be a novelty.

Lina looks up. Just enough to take in the scene, the sideboard, the

patrons, Eliam standing there in full, earnest flourish.

She exhales.

“Eliam,” She says, voice even, “Not now.”

The words are gentle but decisive.

She gestures with her chin toward the back corridor, “I need the clean towels brought up. Then you can help with supper prep.”

It is not a rebuke, he knows. It is practical, immediate, and very clearly outside the tone he has adopted. Just a moment that reminds Eliam that Lina is a woman running an inn.

“Yes, Lina,” He says at once, the word shrinking back into his normal register. He inclines his head— less a bow than the echo of one— and turns away.

As he walks, the shift happens all at once. The careful lift of his posture drains out of him, his steps quieter. The role folds away, unfinished, like a play halted mid-scene.

He gathers the towels, stacks them neatly against his chest, and pauses there longer than necessary.

He tells himself, sensibly, that of course she would stop him. There are paying patrons in the room. This is a working hour. His flourishes are charming to customers and friends, but this— This felt different, even

to him. Less presentation, more invitation.

That is the part he had not meant to offer.

When he returns, the common room is emptier. Lina is watching him, not openly, but he knows because she looks away just a fraction too late, like someone who has already taken in the whole of a thing.

“You alright?”

“Yes,” He says immediately. Too immediately, “Of course.”

“You deflated,” She says after a moment.

Eliam replies with a tight smile and the assurance that she is doing everything he wants her to. The words feel like sandpaper on his tongue.

Over the next three days, it repeats in small variations.

He keeps offering her language like a hand extended— Theatrical and faintly absurd in the way it has always been. A mock-formal bow before beginning a task. A sentence shaped as though it expects a reply in kind. He is not consciously trying to provoke anything. He simply keeps circling the place where it almost happened before, hoping she will step into it with him.

She does not. She remains practical and telling him what to do, and he does it.

By the fourth day, his usual noble affectations begin to dim.

The florid phrases shorten. The exaggerated cadence flattens. He still speaks politely, carefully, but the extra lift— the self-conscious poetry, the sense of standing on an invisible stage— fades under the weight of unreturned gesture. It is difficult to perform to an audience that will not meet your eyes.

Whatever this arrangement is, it eases him without fulfilling him. It presses on the right places but never quite clicks. He feels as though he is missing a crucial element, some small but essential turn that would make the whole thing cohere.

Lina, he thinks, has sensed the edge of that. Enough to say not now. Enough to notice when he shrank back from it.

The shape of what he actually wants remains just out of reach.

Like a word on the tip of his tongue.

A few days pass, and with them the weather shifts, not enough to bring travellers back in force, but enough to justify airing the front room and setting the long tables together. Eliam decides, with a small thrill of resolve, to host another salon.

He tells Lina first, of course. He always does. She lifts an eyebrow, glances at the ledger he has already balanced twice that morning, and

says, “If you’re going to turn my inn into a parlour, at least make sure the tea’s good.”

Which is permission, as far as Eliam understands it.

By late afternoon the front room smells of boiled water, beeswax polish, and fabric. The good tablecloth is out— Not the *best,* but the one that suggests care rather than display. Cushions have been redistributed with an eye toward symmetry. Eliam has dressed deliberately: One of his newer garments, freshly pressed, the cut just a touch too ambitious for the cloth, cuffs turned back to reveal a lining that almost agrees with the outer colour. He has added a ribbon at the throat that no one asked for and which serves no purpose at all except to make him feel correct.

The bell over the door rings, and then rings again.

Thom arrives first, stamping damp from his boots and making a show of bowing far too deeply. Joren follows with a parcel under one arm, his contribution announced cheerfully, “Thread. I ran out last week.” Silas comes last, cane tapping lightly, expression already amused by the soundscape of it all.

“Well,” Thom says, taking in the room, “If this gets any more refined, we’ll need to start charging admission.”

“Greetings and salutations, friends,” Eliam beams despite himself, “You’re early.”

“Of course we are,” Joren says, “You told us three o’clock.”

“Yes, but—”

“—which means two forty-five,” Thom finishes, already settling into a chair, “You’d have paced yourself into a nervous collapse otherwise.”

They shed coats. Tea is poured. Sewing baskets appear, as if by magic, though Eliam knows precisely where each one has been kept. He brings out the fabric he purchased—nothing extravagant, though his friends would disagree. His intention is for something that gestures at nobility without ever quite reaching it, though he is certain everyone around him will see it as garish but be nice enough to not comment on it.

Silas runs the cloth through his fingers thoughtfully, “This will drape nicely. If you don’t overwork it.”

“I never overwork,” Eliam says automatically, then hesitates, “… Much.”

They laugh. The sound loosens something in him.

Soon needles are threaded. Thom, who claims to sew terribly, nonetheless insists on helping and is immediately corrected—explicitly, and with cheer— by both Joren and Eliam. Eliam hears himself doing it, the tone crisp and certain: “No, not like that. Smaller stitches. Even. You’ll pucker it otherwise.”

Thom squints at him, “You say that every time. And every time you are lying.”

“I am *aspirational*,” Eliam counters, offended in a way that is almost

pleased, “There is a difference. One must aim for order, even if the hands betray you.”

“You labeled the thread tins by weight last time.”

“They were *unlabeled,”* Eliam says, with genuine horror, “How was anyone meant to make an informed decision?”

Joren smiles faintly at that, eyes still on his work, “You did give them titles, though. I remember that.”

Eliam pauses, needle mid-air, “…They were provisional.”

“‘Heavy Blue, First of Her Name,’” Thom recites, delighted, “I’ll never forget it.”

There it is—that answering spark. The indulgence. The shared amusement that doesn’t flatten him or tell him *not now,* but lets him be a little much without consequence. Eliam’s voice slips upward into something more polished, more performative.

“I was under the impression,” He says loftily, “That one ought to address one’s tools with the respect due their station.”

Silas hums, “And what station is that?”

“Essential. Underappreciated. Prone to rebellion if mishandled.”

“That explains the flour sacks,” Joren says dryly.

Eliam’s mouth opens, then closes again, “…They listen better when encouraged.”

They are smiling at him. All of them. Listening. Letting him wind himself up and take the small stage offered by the long table and the lamplight. It is not enough to sate him entirely— he can feel the edge of that lack— but it is close. Close enough to ease the ache.

The work settles again, the rhythm returning as conversation drifts. Politics arrives not as an argument but as a gravity well, something they all circle sooner or later.

“They arrested three of them this time,” Joren says, not looking up from his embroidery, “The ones with the placards.”

“Four,” Thom corrects, “One of them apparently threw ink. At a magistrate’s boots.”

Silas hums softly, “That’s… an escalation.”

Eliam listens, needle moving with careful precision. His expression has softened, but there is a tension beneath it now, something quieter and more intent.

Thom snorts, “I still don’t see the appeal. I don’t need that sort of trouble. My wife takes good care of me.”

“So does mine,” Joren adds easily, “I’m not about to stand in a square and demand more. More of what? I’ve got food, a roof, a place to be useful.”

Eliam believes them. That’s the trouble. Their contentment is not feigned. It sits comfortably in their voices, in the ease with which they speak of being cared for. It is not small or pathetic. It is real. And there’s Jonas. His brother, he thinks, would not be marching in a square. Would not be shouting beneath banners. He cannot picture his brother cultivating a beard in defiance of anything at all.

And yet—

Jonas deserves safety nets. Not because he would use them recklessly, but because he would never think to ask for them otherwise. Eliam realizes, with a faint clarity, that whatever sympathy he feels for the Whiskered Compact, it is not entirely for himself. It is for his brother. For the man who learned too early how easily the ground can give way beneath one’s feet.

Lina appears at the edge of the room without announcement, a ledger tucked under her arm. She does not interrupt. She watches.

Eliam notices her only because Thom straightens reflexively, then relaxes again when she merely nods and takes a seat near the wall. She observes with the sharp, assessing calm she brings to everything: the way Eliam directs the work, the way the men defer with a woman in the room.

“Tea?” Eliam asks, already rising.

Lina lifts a finger, “Finish your stitch.”

He does. He sits back down. The pleasure that sparks at her words surprises him enough that he nearly pricks himself.

Conversation resumes. Someone mentions the Whiskered Compact again, only briefly, in the context of whether the arrests will scare them off or embolden them. No one is cruel or wanting them to suffer in arrest, but no one is particularly kind.

Lina's gaze flicks to him once, sharp and curious, as if she senses the tension without needing it named. It lingers on the half-assembled garment laid out across the table. The ambitious cut, the trim chosen for what it *wants* to be rather than what it strictly is. Eliam smooths the fabric by habit, coaxing the lines into something that resembles nobility more than it quite achieves. He has always been better at imagining status into cloth than inheriting it outright.

By the time dusk settles, the garment has taken shape. Not finished, but close enough to be admired. The sleeves fall a touch too dramatically, the collar a shade too hopeful, but the effect is unmistakable: intention made visible.

The men stand back, appraising it with mock solemnity.

"Well," Thom says, "You'll scandalize half the town."

"Only half?" Eliam asks, smiling, "How restrained of them. I'd hate to be thought inefficient."

They linger a while longer, discussing stitch choices and whether the cuffs ought to be tempered, then depart with promises to return. When the door closes behind them, the room feels suddenly larger, the

air settling back into its familiar quiet.

Lina stands, “You did well,” She says simply.

“Thank you.”

She pauses, eyes returning to the garment, then to him. “Next time, you may tell them when to leave.”

The permission lands cleanly, neatly, like a pattern piece finally aligned.

“Yes, Lina,” He says, “Of course.”

She inclines her head, satisfied, and returns to her ledger.

Eliam gathers the scraps of fabric, the abandoned cups, the small signs of a day that has been more than diversion. Thread ends cling to his cuffs. The room smells faintly of tea and wool. He feels tired, but settled, in the way that comes from having been useful without having to justify it.

The world beyond the inn remains uneven and unresolved. He has not solved it. He does not expect to. But for the first time, he understands that holding peace in one room does not require denying the unrest outside it. That understanding lingers.

It lingers for an uncomfortable amount of time.

He hesitates, hands stilling over a folded scrap of cloth.

“Lina,” He starts carefully.

She does not look up. “Yes?”

He clears his throat, “I was… thinking. About those men.”

The ledger stops making its quiet scratching sound. She lifts her eyes slowly.

“Which men.” It’s not said as a question.

“The— The gentlemen with the unfortunate opinions about facial hair.”

“Go on.”

He gathers a scrap of fabric between his fingers, rolling it absentmindedly, “I was only thinking… the inn is quiet, and they were — well. Displaced, for a time. After the arrests.”

She studies him, already suspicious, “Eliam.”

“I know,” He says quickly, “I know. I don’t mean— not in the sense of… banners. Or speeches. Or— gods forbid— pamphlets.”

She closes the ledger flatly, “We are not hosting a political society.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that,” He says, hands lifting in a small, placating arc, “Merely— hospitality. As patrons. Paying patrons. Quiet ones, ideally.”

“Do you want the inn associated with them?”

“No— Well. Not associated. Accommodating. Briefly. In the way one accommodates… weather. It’s an inn. If they came in seeking shelter we wouldn’t shoo them away, would we?”

She stares at him.

“They were arrested,” He repeats, weaker than he intends, “Some of them. And I thought— perhaps they might appreciate a place to sit. To drink tea. Without shouting.”

“Eliam,” Lina says evenly, “They are not weary travellers caught in a storm. They are men loudly dissatisfied with their station in life.”

“Yes. But— they are still men. They should be treated gently.”

She exhales through her nose, “You’ve said that you do not agree with them.”

“No,” He says promptly, though the word lands a fraction too fast to

sound entirely trustworthy, “I don’t. Not— wholesale. I mean— divorce is quite extreme, don’t you think? But we can be neutral ground for them. They can surely think of other things to discuss with one another, no talk of spouses dying and being left abandoned—”

“Eliam.”

“I have no interest in destabilizing the inn. Nor in— pursuing independence in a dramatic or disruptive fashion.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

He pauses, “You… weren’t?”

“No,” She says flatly, “I’m more concerned that you seem convinced I’m one bad cough away from expiring and leaving you destitute. You speak of these whiskered men as being misplaced. I am abundantly aware of your fear of having the same happen to you.”

“…In my defence,” Eliam offers meekly, “It was a very loud cough.”

She narrows her eyes at him.

“…And it lingered,” He adds unhelpfully, “I’m— I’m sorry, Lina. It’s merely that— once the thought presents itself, it does tend to cascade.”

A pause settles between them, quieter now, less brittle than before.

Eventually, Lina lets out a huff, “For the record, if I do ever take ill, I expect you to bring soup. Not preemptive grief.”

He allows himself a small, sheepish smile, “Yes, Lina.”

“But returning to these men… You want to offer them… comfort.”

“I— Yes. Structure. Civility. A chair that doesn’t tip when they lean too far forward.”

“And you think this won’t turn into something.”

“I would not permit it to,” He says, then startles at his own certainty.

Her eyes narrow, “You?”

“Yes. Me. I would merely host them as I would any patron.”

Another long pause.

“You enjoy my being strict,” She says slowly, with a hint of baffled exasperation, “You do not agree with their demands. You do not wish to emulate them. And yet you want to offer them shelter.”

“Yes,” Eliam says, relieved she has put it into words, “I think— perhaps— they deserve a room where nothing is asked of them. Where

they don’t have to argue their existence.”

“That sounds suspiciously like a salon,” She says.

He brightens, then reins it in, “A very modest one.”

She watches him for a moment longer, expression unreadable. Then she opens the ledger again, “We’ll see.”

The word is not permission. But it is not refusal, either.

“Thank you.”

She does not look up, “Do not make me regret it.”

“Yes, Lina. I would never,” He replies fervently.

She snorts.

He gathers the last of the fabric and cups, moving quietly now, mind humming. It’s not quite triumph or anything so grand, but with the careful satisfaction of having asked for something difficult and not been dismissed outright.

He is not a revolutionary. He knows that. But neither is he entirely indifferent.

And for now, that balance, awkward and imperfect as it is, feels like something he can live inside.

The dining room is comfortably full, the low hum of conversation softened by steam and clink and the steady rhythm of the inn at supper. Candlelight pools across polished tables, catches on brass fixtures worn smooth by decades of hands, glows in the amber glass of the wall sconces.

Eliam moves between tables with a tray balanced at his shoulder.

He is wearing the coat he had been making in the salon with his friends.

Finished now. Properly lined, the seams pressed until they remember their purpose. The sleeves fall a touch too dramatically when his arms are at rest, the collar lifting his chin just enough to suggest confidence rather than demand it. The trim is ambitious, chosen not for what the garment strictly requires, but for what it wants to become. There is something almost aspirational in it, as though the cloth itself believes it belongs in finer company.

As he passes the hearth, he pauses just long enough to nudge the frame of a landscape back into alignment. A glance toward the bar. Lina is there, ledger open, one hand resting lightly against the counter. She does not look up.

He dusts the frame with the edge of his sleeve and moves on.

The inn has patrons but is not crowded. Local women come in from

the road, a pair of merchants finishing a late course, voices kept comfortably low. It is the sort of evening Eliam likes best. Something contained, orderly, and predictable. A room where he knows precisely how to exist.

He lifts the tray again, turns toward the window table, and it is then— just then— that he hears them.

At the corner table by the window, two women linger over their plates, wine already warming their voices.

"—I'm telling you," One says, laughter loose and unguarded, "If my husband ever tried that nonsense at the well, or grew a beard, I'd tan his hide myself."

Her companion snorts, wine sloshing dangerously close to the rim of her cup, "Oh, I wouldn't bother with the hide. I'd send him to my sister's with a limp and let her finish the job."

They laugh. Loudly. The sound cuts across the room like a dropped utensil that keeps skidding.

Eliam pauses.

Only for a fraction of a second, no more than the time it takes to breathe in, but long enough for the laughter to strike him squarely in the chest. Something tightens there, sharp and immediate. A sense of wrongness that is not abstract or theoretical, but visceral. The words snag against the careful order of the room, against the effort he has spent all evening coaxing things into alignment.

The coat feels suddenly conspicuous on his shoulders. Too fine for the moment. The trim catches the candlelight as if to draw attention to him, to mark him as someone who ought to know better than to speak.

He lowers the tray onto their table with exquisite care. Too much care. The plates do not rattle. The cutlery does not clink. His hands are steady even as his pulse accelerates.

“Ladies,” He says, voice smooth and polite, pitched just a shade higher than usual, “I’m sure you didn’t intend it so, but such remarks are… in rather poor taste.”

The laughter falters, as though it has struck an unseen wall.

One of the women turns in her chair, eyebrow arching, “Excuse me?”

Eliam’s heart begins to race. He can feel it in his throat, in the careful line of his spine. Every instinct urges retreat, deference—

But his mouth, traitorous and overtrained, presses on.

“Joking about violence,” He continues, hands folding neatly at his waist, “Even hypothetically, is unbecoming. Particularly in mixed company.”

There is a beat of stunned quiet. Then the second woman lets out a sharp, incredulous laugh. “Mixed company. He’s *correcting* us.”

“I believe,” Eliam says, heat rising into his cheeks but his voice still maddeningly composed, “That civility is not a gendered expectation.”

That does it.

“Lina,” The first woman calls, turning in her chair, smile sharpening into something edged and unpleasant, “Your husband appears to be lecturing us.”

The room shifts. A few heads turn and someone at the far table falls quiet. Eliam becomes acutely aware of how straight he is standing, of how carefully his coat sits, of how visible he has made himself by choosing to speak. Behind the bar, Lina looks up from her ledger. One glance is enough. She takes in the women’s expressions, the tension at the table, Eliam standing as though awaiting inspection, hands clasped, shoulders squared just a fraction too tightly.

She crosses the room at an unhurried pace.

“Is that so?” She asks mildly.

“He objects to our humour. Quite passionately.”

Lina’s gaze flicks to Eliam. Just once.

“Eliam, what are you doing?”

He swallows. The words feel suddenly enormous in his mouth, “I—they were making light of marital violence.”

“And?”

“And I felt it was… inappropriate.”

“I see.”

Then she turns back to the women, her expression flattening into something practical and unmistakably final.

“The Wayrest Tavern is not that sort of establishment. We don’t host jokes about beating one’s spouse. Finish your meal, or find somewhere else to laugh.”

The women bristle. It looks as though one of them might argue, but Lina’s tone leaves no room for spectacle. After a beat, one sniffs and looks away. The other mutters something under her breath and stabs at her food.

Lina turns back to Eliam.

“You,” She says, “Will return to the kitchen.”

His stomach drops.

And, unexpectedly, then settles.

“Yes, Lina,” He says at once.

“Without commentary.”

“Yes, Lina.”

“And you will let me handle the guests.”

“Yes, Lina.”

He doesn’t move immediately, not entirely sure what is keeping his feet rooted at the spot. His pause is not long enough to draw attention from others, but it *is* too long to be accidental. Eliam remains very still, heart finally slowing, the room reordering itself around him. He does not understand why the correction steadies him more than the confrontation rattled him, only that something has aligned again, and that the weight of her words sits comfortably across his shoulders.

Lina watches him for longer than necessary.

Then, dryly, “Go on.”

And he does. By the time Lina joins him several minutes later, the kitchen has reclaimed its usual sounds. The clatter of plates, the low hiss of the hearth, the steady comfort of work resumed. Eliam is wiping down a counter that does not strictly need it, movements almost meditative.

Lina leans against the doorframe, arms folded.

“You corrected paying guests. In public.”

“Yes, well. Someone had to. It was inappropriate. Entirely outside the tone of the establishment.”

“Mmm.”

He flushes, and suddenly feels compelled to say, “I don’t enjoy confrontation.”

“No,” Lina says quietly, “But I think you enjoyed it when I told you to go to the kitchen and leave the guests to me.”

Something in Eliam goes very still, very attentive, like a hound hearing a distant horn. His gaze fixes on the counter, on the faint ring left by a mug, as though the proper response might be written there if he only looks long enough. Lina watches him closely. He can feel it, her attention sharpened now, curious rather than corrective.

She continues, her tone shifting into something almost thoughtful, “I will say, for a brief moment, I felt like a noblewoman ordering someone off her estate.”

Eliam’s reaction is immediate and mortifyingly physical. His spine straightens before he can stop it, shoulders drawing back and chin lifting a fraction as though the image has pulled him into alignment. Heat rushes through him, sharp and bright, settling low in his chest and radiating outward until he is aware of his own posture, his breathing, the way his hands have curled slightly at his sides. He forces them still, embarrassed by the betrayal of his body.

“I don’t make a habit of imagining myself that way,” Lina continues, “But I can see the appeal. Clear authority. No ambiguity. No room for negotiation once a decision is made.”

Eliam swallows. His pulse is steady again, treacherously so.

“I—I thought it was… effective,” He offers carefully.

“So did I,” She pauses, “It made me wonder… What if… I leaned into it?”

He blinks, “Leaned… Into it?”

“The sort of speech you favour. The whole ceremony of it. Not in front of guests, but something private, with just us… If I were to speak with a bit more… elevation.”

“You mean as a— as a kind of role?”

“Yes,” Lina says, “A role.”

His heart gives a small, traitorous leap.

“I don’t think what we tried before— me being stricter with you all the time— was actually working,” She goes on, “And frankly, I don’t want to spend my life micromanaging you. That’s not fair to either of us. Something like this… Feels different..”

The moment Lina names it— *I don't think*— his chest tightens, not in dread but in a sharp, electric way that makes him want to sit up straighter and also disappear under the blankets at the same time. His mind leaps ahead of her words, stumbles over itself, trips on possibilities he does not have the dignity to look at directly.

Excited is too crude a word. It feels like recognition without permission.

He folds his hands together, fingers laced with unnecessary care, as if restraint might leak out of him through his joints. His face is warm. His ears feel hot.

"I could tell," Lina continues, slower now and clearly choosing her words, "That you were… disappointed with some of it."

"I wasn't—" He stops himself, because lying would be pointless and correcting her would be worse, "I didn't mean to be," He amends weakly.

"I know. That's sort of the problem."

His heart is beating far too fast for a conversation that is, on its surface, perfectly ordinary. He feels as though he's been called on in a room where he didn't know there was an audience. She shifts and he watches the movement with an intensity he hopes is not obvious.

"I thought it would help. I mean— It did. It does. I'm calmer. I function better," Eliam rambles inelegantly.

“I can see that. But I can also see when you… deflate.”

The word again. This time gentler. More accurate.

He swallows. His voice comes out quieter than he intends, “I don’t want to be difficult.”

“You’re not. You’re just not getting what you’re actually reaching for.”

That makes his breath hitch. *Reaching for.* The phrase feels perilously close to something he has only admitted to wanting in the privacy of his own head. He has always framed it as habit, as affectation, as harmless nonsense that everyone tolerates because it is easier than asking him to stop.

He risks it then, the old instinct rising without his full consent.

“Well,” He says, lifting his chin a fraction, smoothing his tone into something faintly elevated and ornamental, “Perhaps if you were inclined to issue her edicts with a touch more ceremony—”

“Eliam. Slow down.”

The momentum breaks. The flourish falters. Reality seeps back in around the edges. The words are gentle and practical, but he can she is tired. It has been a long day and there is no space for this particular experiment *yet.*

He understands that much. But still, something in him collapses. It is

not dramatic. No visible slump. Just an inward dimming, like a candle snuffed between fingers. The cadence drains out of his voice. He looks away, embarrassed by the speed of his own reaction.

“Of course,” He says, back in his ordinary register, “Sorry.”

Lina’s brow creases, not in irritation but in belated understanding. She does not miss much, especially not things that involve work or people she’s responsible for. And he is, undeniably, one of those.

She exhales slowly.

“That, right there.”

He stiffens again, half-expecting a rebuke.

“I wasn’t stopping you because it was wrong. I was stopping you because I hadn’t caught up yet. But I think… I think I finally see the pattern.”

He risks a glance at her. She is not looking at him like someone correcting an employee. She is looking at him like someone solving a puzzle they have underestimated.

“I really didn’t know what you wanted. Not beyond ‘stability’ and ‘strictness.’ And that part is still true. But it’s not the whole of it. I think what you want isn’t just instruction. It’s… participation.”

His pulse spikes so hard it makes him dizzy.

“You don’t want me actually managing you,” She goes on, “You want —” She stops, searching for the right phrasing, then gives a short, almost rueful huff, “You want a partner on your stage. Someone who meets you halfway but also watches and joins your performance.”

Eliam feels as though she has said something unspeakably intimate aloud in a perfectly neutral tone. When he opens his mouth, his reply initially only comes out as a strangled noise.

“I—” His voice cracks. He clears his throat while mortified, “That sounds… terribly indulgent.”

She snorts, “You make up noble titles for the flour sacks. I think indulgence is already in the room.”

Despite himself, a breathy laugh escapes him. It only makes his embarrassment worse, because now there is warmth layered over it, and hope, and a bright, ridiculous thrill he does not know how to sit with.

“I don’t need it,” He says reflexively, despite knowing damn well he doesn’t even agree with himself, “I mean— I know it’s silly. It’s a silly habit I’ve yet to shed.”

“I know you don’t *need* it. But you keep offering it. Like an invitation no one ever quite accepts. I’m not saying I’m ready to—” She circles a finger in the air, as if encompassing silk curtains and imaginary thrones and whatever else he conjures when he slips into that voice, “All of that. Not yet.”

The spark dims, just slightly.

“But,” She adds, meeting his eyes, “I don’t think pretending it’s just a quirk of yours is doing either of us any favours.”

His chest aches.

“Yes,” He says, because it is the only response he can manage that does not sound like begging. He is still embarrassed. Still buzzing. Still painfully aware that he has been seen more clearly than he intended.

But underneath it all, there is a strange, steady relief.

Someone has finally looked at the stage he keeps building for himself, and acknowledged that it exists.

“I’ll need to make you a garment befitting your station, then,” He blurts.

The silence that follows is profound. Lina blinks. Then, slowly, her mouth curves.

“Of course you will.”

He flushes to the tips of his ears, mortified and absurdly pleased all at once, “I only meant— if one is to assume a role, one should do so properly. Cloth matters. Presentation— presentation always matters.”

“I see. I suppose you always did care about presentation,” Her eyes

are… *bright* now. Watchful. Amused, “And here I thought I was proposing just a manner of speech.”

“You can’t possibly expect it to work without the correct silhouette,” Eliam says earnestly, already gesturing in the air as if measuring lines that do not yet exist, “It would feel… incomplete!”

Lina looks at him for a long moment.

Then, very calmly, “You appear very excited by this.”

Eliam opens his mouth, then promptly closes it. Lina exhales then, a sound halfway between amusement and surrender. She shakes her head once, very slightly, and her voice almost comes out as fond when she speaks again.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re a bit odd, Eliam?”

He blinks. The question catches him off guard. It is not cruel, but it is… accurate. *Odd.* Yes. He has been called fastidious, precious, overly mannered, delicate. He has been praised for polish and scolded for excess. Odd is… perhaps the kindest summary of it all.

“I—” He considers, then offers the truth with careful dignity, “I believe it has been… implied.”

A corner of her mouth lifts. She lets out a quiet chuckle, the sound warm and unguarded in a way that still feels new between them.

“Married this long,” Lina says, glancing back toward the door, then at him again, “And I feel like I’m still learning you.”

Something settles in his chest at that. A soft, steady sense of being *seen again*— simply acknowledged.

“Yes, Lina,” Eliam says softly.

Several evenings later, Eliam stands at the foot of their bed with his hands clasped behind his back and his heart attempting to climb out through his throat.

The garment lies folded on the coverlet between them.

It is, without question, the finest thing he has ever made.

He knows this with the same certainty he knows his own name. Not because it is flawless— there are stitches he can still see if he looks too closely, places where the fabric resisted him and had to be coaxed — but because it is *considered.* Nothing here is accidental. Nothing is doing more work than it must.

The fabric alone would have frightened his younger self. It is heavier than anything he usually allows himself, a dense wool-silk blend that holds its shape without stiffness, dyed a deep, dignified green-black that absorbs the lamplight rather than throwing it back. The colour has depth to it, a subtle shift when it moves, as if it has been worn into authority rather than dyed into pretension.

The cut is ambitious but disciplined. High-waisted, tailored through the torso, structured at the shoulders without padding, the lines long and uninterrupted. It borrows from the riding coats favoured by noblewomen of the capital, translated carefully for Lina's frame. The sleeves are fitted but not tight, the cuffs finished with a narrow band of darker trim, no embroidery, no filigree. The collar stands clean and confident at the throat, not choking, not coy.

The trim is restrained. That, more than anything, marks the difference from the usual garments Eliam creates. No hopeful excess. No ornamental flourishes trying to insist upon importance.

It knows exactly what it is.

Eliam's fingers ache faintly as he holds it, the memory of the work still in them: The hours hunched over candlelight, the careful unpicking and re-stitching when a seam lay even a fraction off. The pinpricks along his fingertips are small but numerous, a constellation of effort. He had pricked himself badly on the inner facing, swore under his breath, then stitched it again anyway, refusing to leave even hidden work sloppy.

He had reinforced the stress points twice. Not because he feared Lina would tear it— she is careful with clothing— but because authority, in his mind, must be able to *endure* movement. To stand. To gesture. To command space without pulling itself apart.

Lina sits on the edge of the bed, watching him with that steady, assessing gaze he has come to recognize as her thinking face. She does not reach for the garment. She waits.

The waiting makes his chest feel tight.

“You don’t have to,” Eliam says quickly, because silence always unravels him and because the full weight of what he has done presses in all at once, “If you’d rather not. This was only meant as a— as an exercise. A proof of concept, really. I didn’t intend to presume—”

“Eliam,” She says.

The single word stops him more effectively than any raised voice. She reaches forward and takes the garment from his hands. Her touch is different from his. It’s practical and used to handling cloth that has lived a life before it ever reached her. She lifts it, testing the weight, then turns it slightly, inspecting the fall of it the way she might inspect a saddle or a harness, checking where it will bear strain.

Her fingers pause at a seam and traces it. She notices the hidden fastening almost at once, thumb finding it beneath the outer layer. Her brow furrows, as she opens and closes it, feeling how it moves.

“This is very good,” She says, “It’s very impressive that you were able to make this while keeping up with your duties with the inn.”

The words hit Eliam like a benediction.

His throat tightens.

“Thank you,” He manages, and then, helplessly, because this is how he shows care, adds, “I reinforced the inner seams. And there’s a concealed fastening here, so it doesn’t pull across the shoulders when you move. I thought it would be… inconvenient, otherwise.”

“Inconvenient,” Lina repeats, faintly amused.

“Yes,” He says earnestly, “Authority should not be distracted by its own clothing.”

She looks at him then, really looks at him, something warm and unreadable in her expression.

“Well,” She says, lifting the garment slightly, “I suppose we should see whether it lives up to your expectations.”

Eliam’s pulse jumps.

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

And as she stands to put it on, he realizes— with a sudden, almost dizzying pride— that for once, his work does not look like a costume waiting to be forgiven. It looks like something that belongs.

Lina slips out of her overshirt. Eliam turns around at once, too quickly, cheeks warming as he fixes his gaze on a perfectly unremarkable section of wall. A small crack in the plaster becomes suddenly fascinating. He clasps his hands behind his back, posture straight and breathing carefully measured.

This is ridiculous. They have shared a bed for years. He has seen her shoulders bared with sweat, her arms bare to the elbow while hauling casks, the familiar intimacy of her body an ordinary fact of his life. They have had *sex* and she wants *children* and—

This feels different.

This feels almost… ceremonial.

There is weight to the silence behind him. Fabric being lifted. The faint sound of fastening. The sense of something *becoming,* rather than merely being put on.

“Turn back around,” She says a moment later.

He does. The effect steals his breath outright.

The shoulders of the garment sit clean and sure, broadening her stance without exaggeration. The waist draws in just enough to give the rest of the line purpose, not softness. The sleeves fall with authority, the cuffs framing her hands rather than adorning them. The colour deepens against her skin, lending her a gravity she does not usually bother to wear.

It does not make her beautiful in a decorative sense. It makes her formidable. Like a real *noblewoman.*

She looks taller. More deliberate. As though rooms would adjust themselves instinctively around her presence, chairs shifted and conversations lowered without anyone quite knowing why. Less an innkeeper at the end of her day, and more a woman accustomed to issuing decisions that ripple outward.

Eliam’s heart begins to gallop.

Lina adjusts the cuffs, testing the movement, then turns to him with

an expression that is openly curious now, measuring him as much as the garment.

“Well?” She asks, “Do I pass?”

He swallows.

“Lina,” He says faintly, and the name alone feels insufficient. He clears his throat, visibly gathering himself, shoulders drawing back as though some invisible cord has gone taut, *“My lady,”* He says instead, nearly sounding breathless.

The words come out reverent. Earnest. Entirely unguarded.

She blinks.

Eliam takes a step forward before realizing he has moved at all, then stops himself short, hands snapping back behind his back. His eyes are bright, far too bright, alight with something dangerously close to glee.

“All right,” Lina says slowly, “We’re starting already.”

“I’m sorry,” He replies at once, “I didn’t mean to rush. It’s just— well, you see— this is precisely the silhouette I was imagining, and it rather invites—”

“What, exactly?”

He hesitates for half a heartbeat.

Then the leash *snaps.*

Not a sound, not a thing he can point to— Just a sudden, internal *click,* like a thought finally finding the hook it was always meant to hang on.

“You will be the noblewoman of a considerable estate,” He blurts out suddenly, the words tumbling out now and enthusiasm breaking through his words, “Landed. Established. Widely respected. The sort of woman whose name quiets a room before she ever speaks.”

He points at her shoulders, the line of the coat, already narrating the role as if it has always existed.

“I will be—” He frowns, thinking, then brightens visibly, delighted with his own solution, “—an errant husband in need of correction.”

She stares at him.

“Errant,” She repeats.

“Yes,” He says, nodding with great seriousness, “Not cruel or incompetent, of course. Merely inclined toward fussing, overreach, and occasional breaches of decorum.”

“You’ve given this thought.”

“I have had *years,”* He says without thinking, then clamps his mouth shut, eyes widening slightly as the implication catches up to him.

There is a beat of silence. He clears his throat, suddenly shy again, though the energy still hums beneath it, “Purely hypothetically,” He adds, far too late.

Lina watches him, something soft and amused and faintly astonished passing through her expression.

“Well,” She says at last, smoothing the front of the coat once more, settling into it, “I suppose it would be rude not to see where this goes.”

Lina shifts her weight, the coat settling fully across her shoulders. It fits her. He knew it would. He had cut it with this posture in mind, even if he had told himself at the time that it was only good tailoring.

“All right, if I’m to play this noblewoman of reputation, I need to know what she’s dealing with.”

His pulse stutters. He hadn’t expected her to step into it so readily, to treat the thing as something real enough to ask questions of. He swallows, suddenly aware of how much of himself he is about to admit to.

“There are… names,” He says, cautiously, “I mean—only in my head.”

“That’s usually where they start,” She replies dryly.

He lets out a breath that is almost a laugh, “Lord and Lady Merrowin,” The names come out smoother than he expects, as if they have been waiting, “An old house in a place called Briarhold. Not ancient, but respectable. The sort of lineage people recognize even if they don’t know the details.”

“And us?” She asks.

He hesitates, then gestures between them, “Married. Recently. Long enough for habits to have formed, but not long enough for them to be fully corrected,” His ears burn, “In the sense of being… refined. Lord Merrowin is— well. Earnest. Attentive. Inclined to excess in matters of propriety.”

Lina raises a brow, then says, almost casually, “When you bow and speak like that… Are you imagining yourself as Lord Merrowin? Is this an alter ego?”

The question hits him squarely in the chest.

“I—” He stops. Tries again, “I didn’t used to think so.” He presses his lips together, mortified by how quickly the truth is lining up, “But yes. I think I must be imagining myself as him.”

Her mouth twitches, “That explains a few things.”

“He’s very particular,” He says, half-laughing, “He means well. He just… requires guidance.”

“And Lady Merrowin?” Lina asks. Her voice has changed, just a fraction. She speaks slower, as if testing the weight of the name.

“She is,” He says, and his voice steadies as he speaks, “Entirely capable of providing any and all correction.”

She nods once, accepting this as if it were simply a matter of household management, “So when you fuss, and hover, and arrange yourself into knots—”

“I am being errant,” He says quickly.

“And when I correct you?”

He draws a breath. His hands curl, then still, as if he has remembered himself.

“You are restoring order. Firmly. With expectation.”

A charged silence settles. Lina reaches up and adjusts the collar of the coat, a small, deliberate movement. The gesture feels ceremonial in a way that makes his spine straighten without him meaning it to. It is such a minor thing— fingers to fabric— yet it carries the unmistakable weight of preparation, of stepping into view. Eliam’s pulse jumps, traitorously loud in his ears, and with it comes a sudden, dizzying realization of how much he wants to be *seen* correctly.

“Very well,” She says, and there is a pause before the next words, as if she is testing their fit, “Lady Merrowin it is.”

His heart kicks hard enough that he has to look away. The name lands heavier than he expects, not because it is grand, but because she says it without irony. She's taking this *seriously*. For *him.* He feels absurdly bare for a moment, like someone has turned a lantern on inside him.

"Yes, Lina—" He stops himself, heat rushing up his neck. The familiarity feels suddenly wrong in his mouth, like speaking out of turn in a room that has quietly reordered itself. He swallows and tries again, slower, more careful, as though precision might keep him from spilling over, "Yes… M–my lady."

The words thrill and mortify him in equal measure. His stomach flips, a sharp, almost giddy sensation, and he has the fleeting and panicked thought that he is doing this *too well,* that his eagerness must be obvious. Lina does not look away. She keeps her eyes on him, with a focus that makes his toes curl inside his boots.

She watches him with new attention now. She had always watched him in some degree. Eliam could tell that much, how she sees his posture changes. Now, this feels different. It's not Lina looking at him. It's Lady Merrowin— looking at the way he holds himself straighter than before, the way excitement and embarrassment chase each other across his face without ever quite settling. He can feel himself being *read,* and that sends another flush through him. He has spent years imagining an audience. He has not prepared for being understood.

"Lord Merrowin," She says, testing it.

It strikes him low in the chest, not as a thrill exactly, but as alignment — As though something long held crooked has been nudged into true. The reaction is immediate and unreasoned. The restless energy that has lived under his skin for so long suddenly has somewhere to go.

He feels himself settle into it before he understands that he has done

so.

He bows without thinking, as natural as breathing. The movement comes from muscle memory older than intention, from a hundred imagined rooms where this posture has meaning, where it is both expected and welcomed.

“Yes, my lady.”

The words feel correct in his mouth. Correct in the way a key turns smoothly in a long-unused lock.

Lina clears her throat.

“Okay…” She starts, and there is a carefulness to it, a sense that she is feeling for the edge of something she cannot quite see yet, “Lord Merrowin. You seem… unsettled.”

He brightens at once, like a hound loosed from the leash. Whatever hesitation lingers in her voice registers to him only as an opening. He steps into it eagerly, gratefully, relief and excitement tangling so tightly he can hardly separate them.

“My lady,” He repeats, and the words spill out of him in a rush of silk and ceremony, “I confess myself grievously afflicted by excess zeal and insufficient restraint. The household has been most patient with my attentions, yet I fear I have once again overstepped the bounds of decorum—”

He is approaching her before she can blink. The room is suddenly a grand chamber in his mind, all imagined marble and draughty

corridors. He paces as he speaks, hands shaping the air, voice rising and falling in practiced cadences. His body knows where to go even if the furniture does not require it. He bows, straightens, bows again, each movement a fraction too eager, a fraction too much, as though ornament might compensate for restraint if layered thickly enough.

“I merely sought to ensure that the silver was aligned,” He continues fervently, “That the draperies fell in proper pleats, that your comfort was anticipated before it could possibly be required. A Merrowin must be vigilant, after all— our reputation was not built on laxity—”

“I— *Eliam,”* Lina says, half a laugh in it, half a plea.

The sound barely reaches him. He is not Eliam. He is *Lord Merrowin.* He is riding the momentum now, intoxicated by the way the role lifts him, by the way being *errant* feels so much better than being merely irritating. His chest is warm, breath quick, awareness sharpened to a bright, almost dizzy edge.

“—and yet here I stand, chastened by my own enthusiasm, awaiting correction with the utmost humility and devotion, as befits a husband who has once again mistaken diligence for—”

She blinks owlishly at him.

This is a lot. He can see it on her face even as he continues, even as some distant, sensible part of him registers that he has overshot her footing entirely. But stopping feels impossible. Excess, at least, has shape. Silence would be unbearable.

“L–Lord Merrowin,” She tries again, louder this time.

The title cuts cleanly through the torrent.

He stops dead, mid-breath. His hands freeze where they hover, fingers curled as if caught in the act. His eyes are bright, pupils wide, breathing just a little too fast, as though he has been running and has only now been told to halt.

“Yes, my lady?”

She straightens. Whatever uncertainty she had slowly drains from her posture, replaced by something firmer, if still unpolished. It is not theatrical. It certainly does not match his cadence. It simply *is*.

“You are fussing. Excessively.”

His mouth opens at once, apology already forming, explanation close behind it, some elegant self-flagellation ready to follow.

Lina— Lady Merrowin lifts a hand.

“Do not speak.”

He freezes.

The room seems to tilt. His pulse thuds in his ears, sharp and insistent. Heat coils low in his belly, startling in its immediacy.

She steps closer, clearly improvising now, but gaining confidence with

each word, “You’ve been warned about this,” She continues, her tone sharpening, “Your eagerness is admirable, but your restraint is lacking.”

He swallows, “My lady—”

“I said do not speak.”

Eliam feels it immediately, the instant everything that came before drops away and something far truer settles into place.

Oh. Oh, this…!

He goes still so fast it is almost comical. The restless energy that had been propelling him has nowhere to go now; it coils under his ribs, tight and bright, making his hands ache with the effort of keeping them at his sides. His breath shortens, then steadies, as though his body has found a rule it has been waiting for.

“Sit,” Lina says.

The word is not raised. It does not need to be.

He obeys at once, lowering himself to the edge of the bed with exaggerated care, spine straight, knees together, and hands folded in his lap. It is not the posture of a chastened servant so much as that of a husband who knows he has misbehaved and is bracing for the consequences of it.

Lina draws a slow breath. She begins to pace and invents as she goes.

“You interrupt. You hover. You meddle. You correct people who you have no authority over and then look wounded when they resent it.”

The coat he made for her moves with her as she paces, clean lines and borrowed authority. Eliam tracks her with his eyes until he remembers himself and fixes his gaze forward again, jaw tight.

“You also,” She continues, now stopping behind him, “Have a habit of mistaking anxiety for diligence. Which is tiresome.”

She steps back in his line of sight and comes closer. Too close. Close enough that he can smell the faint soap on her hands, feel the heat of her through the air. She studies him for a long moment, head tilted, as though assessing a problem she has not yet decided how to solve.

Then, without warning, she reaches out.

Her thumb brushes his lower lip.

It is quick. Almost incidental. Gone as soon as it arrives.

Eliam’s breath stutters all the same. Heat flares low and sharp in his body, intense enough to make his toes curl inside his boots. His hands tighten in his lap. His awareness narrows to the point of contact and then to the absence of it, to the space where her thumb had been and the unbearable knowledge that she chose to touch him at all.

Lina pulls her hand back as though she has startled herself.

She clears her throat, “You may speak now.”

He looks up at her, eyes bright, expression momentarily unguarded.

“Mistaking anxiety for diligence,” He says, a touch breathless despite himself, “Is a family trait.”

She raises a brow, as if to say *Is that Eliam or Lord Merrowin speaking now?*

“...You will remain still. You are exhausting enough without motion.”

“Yes, Lady Merrowin.”

She looks at him after that, arms folded, weight shifting subtly as she considers what to do with the obedience she has just elicited. Eliam does not move. He does not fidget. The effort of remaining perfectly still hums through him like held breath.

“Good,” Lina says at last, “That is better.”

She resumes pacing, slower now, continuing to settle into the shape of Lady Merrowin rather than trying it on, “You are far too accustomed to indulging yourself. All that fussing. All that performance. You forget that enthusiasm without restraint is merely noise.”

His throat tightens. He nods once, carefully, the smallest motion he dares allow himself.

“In my household,” She says, stopping in front of him again, “Husbands who forget themselves are corrected.”

She says it almost casually, like she’s repeating a rule she’s known a long time but hasn’t spoken aloud in this particular way before. There’s the faintest hitch afterward, a pause she doesn’t quite smooth over.

Corrected.

The word lands with a familiarity that makes his breath catch. It’s recognition. His body responds before he can decide how he feels about it, heat flaring low and spreading in that slow, heavy way he knows too well. This isn’t new. What’s new is that it doesn’t arrive with dread.

She’s watching him now, openly curious, as if gauging how much the word did.

“Sometimes that correction is verbal,” She goes on, then— lighter, almost wry— “And sometimes it’s… harder to forget.”

Her mouth quirks, just slightly, like she’s half-amused at herself for saying it. As if she’s testing whether the words will hold if she lets them out into the air.

His fingers curl once in his lap before he stills them. He keeps his posture neat out of habit, spine straight, knees together. He’s been taught this shape a dozen times over, but never with this tone. Never with the possibility threaded through it.

Lina shifts her weight, “It tends to involve standing where you’re told. Staying still. And accepting the lesson without argument.”

She glances at his face, then away again, the way someone does when they’re pretending not to check whether they’ve gone too far.

“Do you understand what I mean, husband?” She asks, a touch of challenge returning, but not enough to hide the uncertainty underneath.

He swallows. His mouth feels dry. The memory is there. Hands, counting the smacks on his rear, the burn afterward, the expectation that he would be grateful for being set right. The difference is sharp enough to hurt a little.

“Yes,” He says quietly. Then, because it feels especially important now, “My lady.”

She exhales. A small sound, almost a laugh, almost not. “Good. Because I would hate to have to remind you in a way that leaves you… uncomfortable when you sit.”

The word is mild. The implication is not.

The shiver that runs through him is unmistakable. He draws a slow breath and fixes his gaze on the floorboards beyond her shoulder, grounding himself the way he always has. The warmth in his chest doesn’t recede. It settles, steady and strange and almost hopeful.

Lina clears her throat, “Not tonight,” She says quickly, “I’m not—” She stops, frowns at herself, then straightens, “This is a warning. A hypothetical. Consider it mercy.”

Mercy.

The word lands differently now, stripped of its old edge. He nods, the motion small, precise, and feels something in him lift instead of brace, and his voice nearly comes out as breathless.

“Yes. Thank you.”

She studies him for a second longer than necessary, then turns away, busying herself with the counter as though she hasn’t just redrawn the shape of the room between them.

And Eliam sits there very still, aware of his body, of the echo of rules he’s lived under all his life, and of the quiet, startling thought that perhaps— under the right hand, in the right voice— they might feel less like punishment and more like passion.

He can feel her taking note, filing away the way he visibly relaxes, the way his breathing evens. *Good information,* her expression seems to say, *Useful for later.*

“Alright. That’s enough for now.”

Enough. Not *over.* Not *stop.* Just enough.

He remains still, waiting for dismissal that does not come, heart still beating a little too fast, body thrumming with the afterimage of authority and restraint and the promise implicit in both.

It's so simple. Nothing like the corrections Eliam shamefully imagines in his head when he's found time to be lost in his thoughts alone. He has imagined a thousand scenes with a thousand characters, and yet Lina saying something so safe— so clearly because she's obviously not going to go that far for their first night of pretending— makes his chest loosen so abruptly it nearly makes him dizzy.

The thought makes him go pink again. He gathers himself, straightens, then checks the impulse halfway through and stills.

"Thank you, Lady Merrowin," He says, voice steady despite the warmth spreading through him. Then, carefully— so carefully— he asks, "Did I—" He stops himself again, then corrects, "Have I satisfied my lady?"

Her mouth curves.

"You have. Adequately."

The word makes his chest warm. Lina lets the silence sit, then steps out of character with a visible, intentional shift. Her posture loosens. Her voice returns to its usual cadence.

"Before this goes any further."

He stiffens again.

“That,” Lina says, gesturing between them, “Was play.”

“Yes,” Eliam says immediately, “Absolutely. Entirely.”

“It does not replace anything real. I am still the owner of this inn. You are still my husband. I do not gain new authority because I put on a coat, and you do not lose any because you bow prettily. Understand?”

He nods fervently.

“This does not leave this room unless we both agree. Lady and Lord Merrowin stay here,” She adds, “They’re not roles to play with guests. Not with staff. Not with your friends.”

“Yes, Lina.”

“And if either of us says stop,” She says, meeting his eyes squarely, “We stop.”

“Yes, Lina.”

“Good. Then we can continue with this… arrangement. Carefully. And with sense.”

Eliam’s smile returns, small and bright and utterly sincere. He assumes that their first attempt at *play* has ended. It was certainly awkward but it was a start— A start to something he frankly never thought he’d

ever try with a partner. Lina was clearly trying to figure things out in the moment. She'll need more practice. But—

He is buoyant with it. With the promise of it. With the idea that next time she might stay in character longer, that the noblewoman might settle into her bones more fully. That this may form into something more unique than his daily life in the inn. That one day Lady Merrowin might correct him without hesitation. Might even punish him, calmly and decisively, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Obscenely, Eliam thinks that Lady and Lord Merrowin might have sex that he may *very much* enjoy. He then promptly chokes on some spit and has a coughing fit, but he is already storing the evening away as something precious and slightly unreal.

Lina sits on the bed with him, smoothing the garment over her knees, still half inhabiting it. They simply breathe. The lamplight flickers. The room feels smaller, more contained, as if the world has politely receded.

"Husband," Lina says.

The word catches him off guard. He looks up at once. He had thought that their little experiment was finished, folded away neatly for another night.

"Yes… My lady?"

She hesitates. It is subtle, but he sees it. The way her fingers flex against the fabric. The way her gaze shifts, recalibrates. She is still in character, but something beneath it sharpens into focus, as if she has found a use for the voice she borrowed.

“You are new to Briarhold. As such, as your wife, I must give you… protections,” She says.

The phrasing is stilted, almost careful. He feels a flicker of excitement anyway— Surprised and pleased, wondering where this extension might lead. But his brow still furrows.

“Protections,” He repeats carefully.

“Yes,” She says, a faint frown creasing her brow as she searches for the right cadence, “Should… should circumstance deprive you of my oversight.”

He stills. The shape of it begins to form.

“In the event of my death,” She continues, more smoothly now, authority settling back into her voice, “You will not be cast adrift. I cannot grant you inheritance under the law as it is, but I have made arrangements. Writs. Trusts. Agreements with parties who will honour them. You would have an allowance that cannot be challenged. Not generous, perhaps, but sufficient. More than sufficient if you keep working as you do. The trust would pay for your food, your clothes, your space. It would be administered by women I trust to keep their word to me.”

His heart begins to pound. He wonders, foolishly, if this is still part of some imagined backstory, some plotline Lady Merrowin has decided upon without warning.

“You would be warded but provided for. No one would be permitted to remove you from your home or seize what is yours by right of

labour.”

Eliam’s throat tightens. The fantasy of play drains, leaving something heavier and far more solid in its place.

“M—my lady,” He begins, then falters, unsure whether to stay in character or abandon it entirely.

She lifts a hand.

“Let me finish,” Lina says gently.

He nods.

“And,” She adds, her voice lowering now, losing some of its performative strength, “Should you ever wish to leave this marriage, I will not bar the door.”

His breath catches.

“You would be free to go. No fuss. No reprisals. I would not use the law’s silence against you.”

He stares at her with a stunned look.

“L–Lina,” he says, her name slipping out bare and unadorned.

She looks at him fully, the noblewoman receding, the woman beneath clear and steady.

"I know you said you don't want a divorce, and I'm not asking for one. But I will not trap you simply because the law would allow it. Should you ever become unhappy with me, you have my word that I will let you go."

Understanding crashes into him all at once.

This— *this*— is what she has been doing. In the midst of play, of humour and borrowed authority, she has been thinking ahead. Thinking of and taking into consideration the fears he carries, and setting about dulling their edges before they can cut him further.

"If something happens to you," He says hoarsely, "I— I was worried about—"

"Yes, I know. You made your worries *quite* clear in recent memory."

He laughs weakly, a breath more than a sound. It scrapes its way out of him, brittle at first, then steadier. The tension in his body eases by degrees.

Lina tilts her head, and then her mouth quirks, her voice coming out as dry as kindling, "Well with all these arrangements in the event of my untimely demise, I do hope this wasn't a ruse and you're not in fact planning my assassination."

The absurdity hits him square in the chest.

He lets out a startled sound and then he is laughing properly, shoulders shaking, the kind of laugh that leaves him a little breathless and embarrassed by its volume. “Gods, no. I wouldn’t even know where to begin! I’d over-plan it. Someone would notice!”

“Mmm,” Lina says, “You’d correct the assassin.”

“I would,” He says helplessly, wiping at his eyes, “Tell them their posture was wrong. Suggest a better route. Then I’d apologize.”

She snorts, the sound unguarded and warm, and something in him settles with a soft, almost physical click. The room feels different after that, lighter, as though the laughter has shaken loose whatever sharpness remained.

He looks at her and feels the weight of everything she has done tilt into focus. The strictness she tried first, careful and well-intended. The moment she noticed it wasn’t quite right. The way she stepped, uncertain but willing, onto the strange little stage he has been building all his life and said, *alright, show me.* And then this. The quiet, practical labour of protection, done without fanfare, without expecting gratitude, simply because she saw the danger and decided it would not touch him if she could help it.

Warmth spreads through him, not the bright fizz of excitement or the sharp relief of being corrected, but something deeper. He has spent so long thinking of this marriage as a structure he must fit himself into, a compromise, a kind of managed containment since he wasn’t somehow lucky enough to be picked out by a noblewoman. He did not expect it to feel like this: like being anticipated. Like being chosen not just once, but repeatedly, in small, thoughtful ways.

“Oh,” He thinks, faintly dazed. *Oh.*

The thought is quiet, almost shy, but it does not retreat.

He might actually fall in love with his own wife.

The realization does not come with fireworks or panic. It comes with a sense of rightness that makes his chest ache. A place, at last, that feels right, somehow. A place where his excess is met with humour, his fear with preparation, his longing with a hand extended rather than a door closed.

He exhales, long and slow, and feels himself settle. Not into a role, not into performance, but into something steadier. Briefly, Eliam wonders that this is what Jonas must’ve felt.

Here. My place… is here.

The Whiskered Compact meets in the narrow square behind the cooper’s shop, where the smell of pitch and damp wood clings stubbornly to the air. Eliam recognizes the place before he recognizes the men. It is the sort of corner designed for work, not witness. Something out of the way and forgettable.

There are six of them today, fewer than last time. Fewer faces to remember, fewer absences to account for. Collars are buttoned high despite the mild weather, beards left untrimmed. Hands remain tucked away, sleeves pulled long, as though the body itself must not draw attention.

A crate serves as a lectern. Someone has chalked the sigil onto its side: a simple curve and line suggesting a beard beneath a mouth that does not speak too loudly. Already smudged. Already handled too often to remain pristine.

Their voices are low and shaped by long practice. This is speech trained not for persuasion but for survival. Cadence taught by caution.

Eliam listens without staring. The words are familiar, worn smooth by repetition: Exit without ruin. Wardship reform. The right to leave a household without being declared unfit, ungrateful, or unstable. The right to be something other than a dependent the moment one steps outside a wife's door.

He learns some of the Whiskered Compact themselves. A husband cast out with nothing but his boots and a letter of dismissal. Another bound to a marriage long dead because the law considers endurance a virtue and suffering proof of character. A man who worked the same land for twenty years and still cannot claim a single furrow as his own.

Someone laughs, briefly, sharply, the sound cut off almost as soon as it escapes. A glance down the street. A pause while a cart rattles past the alley mouth.

Eliam adjusts the strap of his satchel. He could move on. No one would fault him. He has never signed a pamphlet, never added his name to anything that could be folded and passed hand to hand.

Instead, he steps closer.

One of the men— young, younger than Eliam expected, with ink-stained fingers and a posture too careful to be accidental— breaks mid-sentence.

“Yes?”

Eliam lowers his voice, “I won’t stay. I only meant… a word.”

The man hesitates, then nods, drifting aside just enough to make space.

“I do not belong to the Compact,” Eliam says plainly.

The man braces but does not retreat.

“But,” Eliam continues, slow and measured, “I do not think you are wrong. Men should be able to leave a marriage without being destroyed by it. We should be able to own the work in our own hands. Land, shops. Not merely occupy them at another’s discretion.”

The man gazes him, eyes narrowed and thoughtful.

“You married into an inn,” He says finally, “People say your wife treats you… generously.”

Eliam almost smiles. Almost.

“She treats me fairly. That is what should be normal.”

The man exhales slowly, as though letting out something he's been holding too long, "You'll get yourself marked talking like that."

"I know," Eliam says quietly. He shifts his weight, then adds, softer still, "If you ever need a place to sit quietly. Without questions. Without having to justify yourselves— Wayrest Tavern. Evenings. Back room. No explanations required."

The man blinks.

"You're offering—"

"A space," Eliam says, simply.

A long silence. Then the man nods, once.

"That's… decent of you."

Eliam inclines his head.

"I must go," He says.

As he steps away, the voices resume behind him. He does not feel pulled into them, nor cut loose from them. He feels… anchored. As though he has placed one stone where it belongs, without needing to build the whole wall himself.

Later, while smoothing the cuffs of a nearly finished garment, his thoughts drift: Lady Merrowin and Briarhold, correction and consent, play and protection. Doors that open both outward and inward. The quiet relief of knowing that wanting to stay does not require denying anyone else the right to leave.

For the first time, the right to remain and the right to depart feel separate, but equally valid. He does not have to reconcile them through action, only through understanding.

It is a clarity he carries silently, alongside the warmth of home, the trust of Lina, and the knowledge that some doors can be both secure and open.

The rain drives them in.

One by one, dripping and hesitant, as though the threshold itself might refuse them. Eliam looks up from the counter when the bell gives its uncertain chime and sees four men standing just inside the doorway, shoulders hunched and hats clutched low. They do not carry banners or placards, but their beards tell him who they are before Eliam even recognizes them.

They do not look like trouble. They look like men who expect it.

Eliam sets the mug he is drying aside and steps forward, “You’re welcome to take any seat you’d like. We’ve got tea still hot. Fire’s decent.”

One of them— older, with a beard gone grey at the temples— nods in

relief, “Thank you. I’m Corin.”

The others follow, introducing themselves in low voices: “Farel.” “Lorin.” The youngest, hesitating at the end, mumbles, “I’m… I’m Tavish.” His shoulders are drawn inward, and Eliam notices immediately that his left eye is darkened, the yellowed edges of a bruise betraying someone else’s hand.

They take the table nearest the wall. The sort of place chosen by men who want to be seen behaving well.

It is only when Eliam brings the tea that he notices how Tavish keeps one hand wrapped around his cup as if for warmth, though the room is already comfortable. One of the older men shifts closer as Eliam sets the cups down, a knee angling in, a body turned just enough to shield Tavish from easy view. It is not subtle. It is protective.

“Let me know if you need anything else,” Eliam says, and means it.

The bell rings again.

Thom comes in shaking water from his hair, followed by Joren, and then Silas, whose cane clicks neatly against the floor. They pause when they see the unfamiliar men.

“Evening,” Thom says, after a beat.

“...Evening,” Comes the reply, careful but polite.

Needles and fabric come out as they always do. Chairs scrape. The long table fills. For a time, the two groups exist separately, the only shared sound the rain and the soft murmur of the fire.

It is Silas who bridges it, as he so often does, by accident.

“Your cup’s too close to the edge,” He says mildly.

There is a startled laugh from the wall table, “How could you possibly —”

“Experience,” Silas replies, smiling faintly.

That breaks something open. One of the men by the wall leans forward, “What are you making?”

“A shirt,” Joren says, “For Eliam. He insists on good seams.”

“I insist on serviceable ones,” Eliam corrects automatically.

Thom snorts, “He lies.”

Tavish smiles faintly, but his eyes flick to the hand nearest him on the table— Lorin’s. It rests lightly on the edge of the chair, a steadying presence.

A chair is drawn closer. Someone offers thread. There is an awkward moment where no one is quite sure if the offer is acceptable, and then

Joren nods and takes it, as if this is the most ordinary thing in the world.

“Here,” Farel says, passing a spool to Tavish, voice quiet. Tavish hesitates, glancing at Corin before taking it with a slight nod. As the evening wears on, Eliam notices how the men at the wall table move around Tavish. How one of them refills his cup without asking. How another intercepts a question meant for him and answers in his place. How, when laughter rises, they watch his face first, gauging.

At one point, Thom drops a needle.

“Damn,” He mutters, crouching.

Tavish starts to move at the same time, then stops short, glancing to his left. A hand touches his sleeve— Not stopping him, exactly, but grounding.

“It’s all right,” Joren says, already reaching for the needle, “Got it.”

Tavish exhales, shoulders loosening.

Later, Eliam brings fresh tea.

“I… I hope we’re not intruding,” Lorin murmurs, hesitating as he sets his cup down, “My wife—” He stops, catches Tavish’s quick glance to the side, “—she asked if I’d be home. But we… we can stay a bit, yes?”

There is a brief silence. Farel draws a chair closer to Tavish, rests a hand near his back without touching. Corin slides a small piece of thread across the table, no words. Tavish takes it, fingers brushing against Farel's. It is almost imperceptible, but Eliam sees.

"It's better here," Corin whispers, low enough for Eliam to catch, "No shouting."

A tentative nod from Tavish. Another quiet exhale.

The rain finally eases. The men gather their coats slowly. Tavish lingers, eyes flicking back toward the long table.

"Thank you."

After the door closes behind them, Thom sits back and stretches, "Huh."

Joren hums in agreement, "Well… they didn't shout or anything."

Thom nods slowly, frowning as if tasting the thought, "Yeah. It was… very normal. Not what I expected. But… You're thinking what I was, right? About that one fellow's eye…"

Joren glances at the table, "If I had to guess… his wife probably isn't nice. Guess we know what he's in the compact."

Thom lets out a low whistle, "Yeah. Now I feel like an arse."

Silas tilts his head toward the door, listening to the fading footsteps, “They’ll be back,” He says.

“You think?” Eliam asks.

“Places where nothing is demanded tend to be remembered.”

Joren and Thom exchange a glance, and a quiet understanding passes between them. “Maybe… maybe they’re not so bad,” Thom says at last.

“Not so bad at all,” Joren agrees, settling back into the chair.

The fire crackles. The tea mugs are empty. The rain has stopped, but something warmer has begun.

Jonas,

I am writing in the evening, after the inn has gone quiet. Lina is upstairs. The lamps are low. It feels like a good hour to tell the truth without fussing at it.

I have read many of your letters more than once. I wanted to answer sooner, and I did not, because I was still trying to arrange my thoughts into something useful instead of something honest. I am trying to do that less.

You do not owe me reassurance. I see now that I have asked for it too often, dressed up as concern. I am sorry for that.

I want you to know that I believe you.

Not only that you are safe, or fed, or treated well, though I am glad of all those things. I believe you when you say you have chosen this life. I believe you when you say it feels like your own. I believe that you are not confused, or being led, or waiting to be corrected into something else.

You have chosen something braver than I ever managed. You chose a life that asks you to be present in your own body. To stay. To be known as you are. That takes a steadiness I do not have. I admire it, even when it frightens me.

I want to say something carefully, because I do not want it to sound like advice, or a warning, or a list of conditions.

I am not trying to protect you anymore.

That does not mean I love you less. It means I trust you more.

I have also chosen something now. A life that fits the shape of me. It does not look impressive from the outside, and for a long time that made me ashamed. I thought settling meant failing. I thought contentment was something you reached only after giving up on better things.

It turns out that is not true.

Lina and I are well. More than well. You had asked me if I loved Lina and I couldn't give you an answer. I think that one day, I will be able to say that yes, I do. I am happier at the inn now, and I look forward to the day you and your frightening Hunting Marshal can visit.

I am telling you this because I want you to understand that I am not waiting for you to come back so I can feel settled. I am already settled.

You do not need to perform happiness for me. You do not need to prove that your choice was the correct one. The fact that it is yours is sufficient.

You have always been more capable than I allowed myself to see. That was my failing, not yours.

Whatever shape your days take, I hope they are gentle to you.

Your brother,

Eliam

Morning arrives *with* ceremony.

The bell rings once, clear and imperious, its tone carrying down the corridor the way it does when a guest grows impatient for service. Eliam startles awake before he can stop himself, heart kicking, body already half-trained to respond.

Then he remembers.

The Wayrest Tavern is closed.

The river road is flooded farther east, the autumn fairs are finished, and the wool merchants will not travel again until the frost settles properly. Lina has declared the week an off-season pause, citing inventory, deep cleaning, and the purely practical matter of wanting her husband underfoot. The shutters are barred, the sign turned inward, and the front door bolted with a finality that feels luxurious.

No guests. No staff. No *witnesses*.

The bell rings again.

Eliam sits up, smooths his hair with unnecessary care, and swings his legs over the side of the bed. He reaches for his robe, then hesitates. Lina does not receive her husband improperly dressed. Lady Merrowin, however, has permitted Lord Merrowin a certain artful disarray. He leaves the robe behind.

He kneels before the bed, as instructed long ago and refined over many mornings like this, and waits.

The door opens without hurry.

Lina enters already transformed. Her hair is pinned high and severe, her posture tall and unyielding, her mouth set in a line that promises both judgment and mercy. She carries the bell loosely in one hand, as if it weighs nothing at all.

“Lord Merrowin,” She says coolly, “You were slow.”

Eliam lowers his eyes. His voice comes steady despite the warmth gathering low in his chest, “My lady. I beg pardon.”

She circles him once, unhurried. She has grown better at this over time— less laughter caught behind her teeth, fewer breaks in character. Confidence suits her. Authority fits her like a well-worn coat.

“The house is quiet,” She says, “Do you know why?”

“Yes, my lady,” Eliam answers, “Because you have closed it.”

“And why have I done that?”

“So that I might attend to my duties without distraction.”

“Mm.” The bell rings softly again, closer this time, “And what duties are those?”

Eliam’s mouth curves despite himself. He still finds it absurd, sometimes, that this is the shape their joy has taken. That it works.

“To be corrected. And improved.”

She stops in front of him. Tilts his chin up with two fingers. Her eyes are sharp, amused, and fond.

“Better,” She says, “You’ve been listening.”

“Yes, my lady.”

They play for hours. Titles pile atop one another like elaborate embroidery: Estates that do not exist, laws invented solely to be broken, petitions granted and revoked at her pleasure. She sends him to fetch imaginary correspondence. She reprimands him for imaginary breaches of decorum. He kneels, rises, bows too deeply on purpose so she can scold him for it.

It is exaggerated. It is theatrical. It is intimate in a way that still surprises him.

They have taken this shape to bed before. Many times now. The bell has rung at other thresholds. Authority has blurred into touch, command into consent. Eliam’s nerves have learned the difference between fear and surrender, and his body responds accordingly.

Later, when the bell is set aside and Lina is no longer Lady Merrowin but simply Lina again, she lies against him, warm and solid, her hand resting possessively at his waist.

“You’re quiet,” She says.

He exhales, slow and content, “I was thinking.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“About children,” He admits.

She stills, just slightly, sensing the weight behind the words.

“And?”

Eliam turns his head to look at her. There is no performance here, no titles or masks to hide behind. “I’m still afraid,” He says honestly, “But it isn’t the same fear.”

She waits. She has learned how.

“I used to think fatherhood meant being trapped. Fixed in place. Responsible in the way men are expected to endure rather than choose. Always answering to rules I didn’t make, weighed down by things I didn’t want.” He swallows, “Now… it feels like something we would enter together. Something shaped between us, not forced upon me. A choice we make, every step of the way.”

Lina studies him for a long moment, then presses her forehead to his, “Good,” She says softly, “Because I wouldn’t do it any other way.”

He lets out a breath, relief loosening something deep in his chest. Not certainty, exactly. But trust. Possibility. A quiet courage he never expected to carry.

“And… you think we’ll manage it?” Lina murmurs, brushing a hand

along his arm, “The teaching, the learning, the… chaos?”

He smiles, a crooked, quiet thing, “We’ll manage. We’ll stumble, and we’ll laugh, and when it’s hard, we’ll do it together. It won’t be perfect — but nothing worth it ever is.”

Her hand lingers on his chest, “Then I think we’ll be enough,” She whispers.

Outside, the tavern remains closed. The world can wait. Inside, Eliam feels settled in a way he never expected. Not *free,* perhaps, but held. Corrected and cherished. Chosen.

He smiles into Lina’s shoulder, already listening for the bell, should it ring again.

“Yes, Lina.”

Chapter End Notes

> Turns out he was probably a little more like his brother than he expected. Just a couple of dudes wanting to be tradhusbands but self-aware enough to know where some aspects of the ~system~ might harm them.
>
> And who knew that some roleplay, that may or may not turn into something kinky, would make Eliam happy with his marriage lmao. Anyway, he’s definitely an odd duck. There were definitely a lot of parts to this lol. The point was for Eliam to use his more theatrical moments as a way to stop yearning for a life he can’t have, and through roleplay he becomes more intentional. The performance (and structure/discipline Lina gives him) soothes him. His marriage goes from functional but hollow to, well, still functional but something he finds genuine joy in. The roleplay becomes a mechanism through which he learns to live honestly. He finally becomes settled.

And in turn, he’s aware that private happiness doesn’t negate public imbalance. The Whiskered Compact destabilizes him with thoughts of wardship and divorce, thus leading him to more seriously figure out what he wants in his life. Again, he’s a tradhusband (lol) but knows well enough that just because he’s found something that works for him, doesn’t mean it works for everyone.

And finally, having figured all that out, he is able to have a proper emotional resolution with Jonas.

So yeah. Hopefully that makes sense lol. Next side story should go back to Branwen/Jonas. Not entirely sure what I'll do for them yet.

Chapter 19: Side Story: Not Quite a Marital Bed

Chapter Summary

> Jonas gets hurt because I'm evil and want to make my characters suffer. But as Branwen takes care of him as he heals, they get... even a little closer.
>
> Takes place a couple of months after the main storyline.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jonas wakes before the light.

The cottage is cool, the hearth long gone to ash and the stones beneath the floorboards holding the night's chill. He lies still for a moment, listening to the quiet they have earned. Not the dead quiet of a sleeping house under rule, but the gentle, lived-in hush of a place allowed to breathe. A gate creaks somewhere down the lane, metal complaining softly before settling again. From farther off come the muffled sounds of the kennels: A low huff and the faint rattle of chain as a hound shifts and resettles as the hounds slowly stir. The stables, in turn, are not far, close enough that the smell of hay sometimes drifts on the wind, but far enough that the noise never quite intrudes.

It feels safe.

Across the room, Branwen sleeps on her back, one arm flung wide, the blanket kicked down around her knees. Her face is slack with real rest, the hard lines softened just a tad as her mouth parts slightly as she breathes. She has the look of someone who has finally learned how to sleep without keeping half an ear open, even if she would deny it awake. Her hair has come loose from whatever knot she tied it in the night before and spills across the pillow in dark, untidy strands.

Jonas watches her for a moment longer than he needs to.

Then he sits up, slow and careful, and dresses. Shirt first, tugged on and smoothed down. Trousers, boots laced quietly, fingers practiced enough not to fumble even in the dim. He moves by memory and habit, avoiding the boards that creak worst. The cottage knows him now; it gives him that courtesy.

He crosses to the pantry and opens the door just enough to see what they have. A loaf wrapped in cloth. Eggs in a shallow basket, one cracked but still usable. A crock of rendered fat, its lid set askew from last night. Dried apples hanging in a small bag from a peg. He counts quietly, lips moving without sound, then takes what he needs and no more, setting the rest back neatly, exactly as it was.

When he glances back, Branwen has shifted, brow creased as if the day has already found her even in sleep. One knee draws up under the blanket. He pauses in the doorway, basket balanced against his hip.

“B–Breakfast,” He murmurs.

She makes a sound that could be agreement or sleep, something low and indistinct, and turns onto her side, facing the wall. Jonas smiles despite himself. He knows she will be up soon enough; as Hunting Marshal, she never truly sleeps in. This is only a head start.

Outside, the air has teeth to it. Jonas pulls his jacket closed and starts toward the stables and kennels, basket tucked under his arm. The yard is grey with early light, the stones still damp from last night’s mist, darkened where water has pooled in shallow dips. His boots leave faint prints that fade as he walks.

The cooking space sits just off the main stable aisle, added months ago when he was re-assigned as attached domestic and it's already worn into use. A low hearth blackened with soot. A narrow table scarred with knife marks and old burns. Shelves lined with tin cups and mismatched bowls, none of them precious, all of them clean. The small pantry beside it smells faintly of grain and dried herbs, its contents modest but orderly.

Jonas sets his basket down and takes stock again, making mental notes of what needs replacing. More oats by week's end. Salt soon. Honey if he can convince someone in the main house to part with it. He knows the preferences now: Who likes their eggs soft, who complains if the bread's too dark, who pretends not to care but always takes seconds.

A wet nose presses insistently at the edge of his knee.

Jonas glances down and smiles. The hound stands just inside the threshold, grey creeping into her muzzle, one ear notched from some long-ago scuffle. She never barks. Following the mirewolf attack, her job is to watch, to listen, to notice what the rest of the kennels might miss. Most mornings she stations herself here, halfway between the horses and the hounds, as if overseeing the whole operation.

Jonas crouches automatically, fishing a strip of dried meat from his pocket, "J–just one," He tells her.

Her tail thumps once against the boards, measured and dignified. He scratches behind her ears, feeling the roughness of old scars beneath his fingers, and she leans into it briefly before stepping back, already on watch again.

Footsteps sound behind him.

“Morning,” Esther says, already reaching for a cup, “You’re an angel.”

He huffs softly, “M–morning.”

Brenna follows her in, rubbing sleep from her eyes, hair coming loose from its tie, “If this is porridge again I’m lodging a complaint.”

“It’s e–e–eggs,” Jonas says, “A–and br–bread.”

She grins, “I retract nothing.”

They eat leaning against the table, steam curling up around their faces. More stablehands drift in and out as the stable fully wakes: someone grabbing a heel of bread with a murmured thanks before ducking back out into the aisle, another pouring tea into a chipped cup and giving Jonas a brief nod of acknowledgement. A third pauses long enough to mutter, “Bless you for this,” before being shooed along by the press of the morning. Most don’t linger. The work waits, and everyone can feel it tugging at them.

Brenna talks with her mouth half full about a horse that refused its tack the night before, stamping and rolling its eye until she’d backed off rather than risk a bite. “Nothing wrong with her,” She says, “Just decided she’d had enough of being told what to do.”

Esther furrows her brows, “That ledger’s the same. Went missing again. I swear it walks off when no one’s looking.”

“Fair folk,” Brenna says lightly, eyes gleaming, “Don’t like being

counted."

Jonas's head instinctively tilts a fraction, "Y–you h–have to l–leave them a s–something. B–bread c–crumbs. O–or a n–nail. S–so they kn–know you m–meant well."

Esther laughs, "Hear that? We've offended the bookkeeping spirits."

"And they'll curse us with extra work," Brenna adds, "Seems fair."

It's said in jest, but someone passing through reaches out and taps the doorframe twice as they go, just in case. Jonas notices and says nothing. He listens, answers when spoken to, nods in the right places. When Brenna's plate is empty, he slides another piece of bread onto it without comment.

When the last of it is gone, he pours what remains into a bowl, wraps it carefully, and sets it aside.

"For M–Miss B–Branwen," He says, though it's unnecessary at this point. Everyone knows he leaves a decent amount of leftover breakfast for Branwen.

"Of course it is," Brenna replies, already pulling on her gloves. She nods toward the door, "I'll take the hounds out. Come on, old girl."

The lookout hound's ears prick. She rises at once, moving to Brenna's side with the quiet readiness of long habit. Together they head down the aisle toward the yard, the hound's steady presence a familiar shadow at Brenna's heel as the rest of the kennels begin to stir, chains rattling softly in anticipation of the morning rounds.

Jonas turns back to the hearth, wiping down the table, setting cups to dry. A groom passes through with a bundle of tack, another with a brush tucked under her arm. Someone leads a horse out, murmuring low and steady, pausing to check hooves before the day's work begins. The building breathes around him, stone and timber and animals all waking in their own time.

Branwen comes in through the main doors with a sack of feed slung over one shoulder, already marked with dust and smudged with dirt. There's straw caught in the hem of her coat, a smear of something dark along her sleeve. She's clearly been at it for a while, she must've gotten up shortly after he left to make breakfast.

She slows as she crosses the threshold, eyes flicking briefly to the doorframe. The talisman he gave still hangs there, tucked up where most people wouldn't notice unless they were looking: A bit of twine tied around a sprig of dried yarrow and a smooth river pebble, notched faintly like a crescent moon.

Jonas watches her glance linger for half a heartbeat before she shifts the sack and carries on inside. Branwen sets the sack down with a grunt and rolls her shoulder once, working out the stiffness. She glances at the hearth, the clean table, the empty cups already set to dry, "You've been busy."

He ducks his head, faintly pleased, "I'll f–finish l–laundry af–after b–breakfast. T–then I th–thought I'd d–do some b–brushing."

She arches a brow, "You don't have to."

"I k–know, but I l–like it."

Her mouth tilts, “Alright. Don’t overdo it.”

He moves then, unwrapping the cloth and holding the bowl out to her. Eggs still warm, bread tucked alongside, a strip of dried meat laid on top like a quiet indulgence he knows she’ll pretend not to notice.

“F–for you,” He says softly.

She takes it, glancing down at the food before flicking her eyes back up to him, “You’re always so on top of everything.”

“I j–just c–cook and cl–clean.”

She snorts, already tearing the bread in half and handing one piece back to him before he can refuse, “That’s not all you do.”

He accepts it, smiling despite himself, and watches while she eats, making sure she takes more than a mouthful or two. She notices and bumps his shoulder lightly with her elbow.

“I’m eating,” She says. “You can relax.”

“J–just m–making s–sure.”

“Mm,” She hums, but she eats another bite anyway. Branwen finishes quickly, wipes her fingers on her coat, and sets the empty bowl aside. Then she’s already moving, stride lengthening as she heads down the aisle. Jonas falls into step beside her.

She moves down the aisle, checking stalls as she goes, one hand trailing briefly along a neck here, a shoulder there.

“Why are th–they st–still in?” He asks, nodding toward the nearer stalls.

“Ground’s too soft,” Branwen says, “Last night’s mist didn’t burn off. I don’t want them tearing it up or slipping. They’ll go out after midday, once it firms.”

He nods, filing it away, “I’ll s–start w–with the g–grey at the end.”

“That one?”

Jonas smiles a little, “L–Lady Rowan.”

She stops and turns to look at him, “Lady?”

He shrugs, shoulders rising almost to his ears, “S–she’s d–dignified.”

Branwen snorts, “Of course you’re giving the horses titles now,” There’s warmth in her words, a fondness that causes Jonas’s ears to go pink at the edges and his heart to give a delighted little skip. He steps closer to the stall, resting a hand against Rowan’s shoulder. The mare flicks an ear back, then forward again, steady and watchful. Jonas’s smile softens.

“I m–miss R–Rilke,” He says suddenly, barely above a breath.

Branwen goes still.

For a moment she doesn’t speak at all. Her hand tightens briefly when she rests against the stall post, knuckles whitening, then eases again.

“I know,” She says at last.

Branwen hasn’t told him much of the mirewolf attack and Jonas doesn’t pry. He knows from bits and pieces that she had felt Rilke surge beneath her, the sudden violence of it, the shock of hitting the ground hard enough to drive the air from her lungs. Had watched the horse bolt into the trees, mane flying, tack half-hanging, and known even then she would not come back. It’s not as though Jonas spent a great deal of time with Branwen’s horse, but the thought that she met her end at the maw of a mirewolf makes him… A little sad.

Jonas nods once, swallowing, “I th–think th–that’s wh–why I s–started n–naming them,” He adds, embarrassed, as if confessing to something indulgent, “J–just a l–little.”

She exhales through her nose, “Yeah, sounds like something you’d do,” After a beat, she adds, “It’s… kind. But don’t let it get you kicked. Horses aren’t as dignified or graceful as you think. Half the time they’re just large idiots with opinions.”

“L–Lady R–Rowan w–would d–disagree.”

“I’m sure she would.”

She reaches out and gives his shoulder a light clap, solid and grounding, “Alright. I’ve got kennel checks, feed counts, and a lame hound to look at. Fence after that. Quiet day, if the world behaves.”

He nods, already tracking it all in his head. “I’ll h–have l–laundry h–hung b–before noon.”

As soon as the last word leaves his lips, one hand grips the front of his jacket and she pulls him into a brief, soft kiss. It’s warm and unhurried — The kind that still manages to steal his breath entirely. Jonas freezes for half a second, then melts into it, hands hovering uselessly at his sides as if he’s not quite sure what to do with them.

When she pulls back, she rests her forehead against his for just a second longer than necessary.

“Behave,” She says teasingly, “Don’t burn down the stables while I’m gone.”

Something in his knees gives a little at that. He nods, too quickly, face warm, heart stuttering in his chest.

“Y–Yes,” He manages.

She smiles and turns away before he can gather himself. Jonas stands there for a moment after she’s gone, staring at the place she was, then shakes himself gently and heads for the laundry, brush and basket already waiting.

The laundry goes quickly. Muscle memory carries him through it: Sleeves shaken out, collars checked, water changed before it cools too much. On average he's doing about seven people's laundry every week. He wrings until his hands ache pleasantly and hangs everything straight, smoothing creases with his palms. By the time he's done, the ache has settled into his shoulders and wrists, the good kind, the earned kind.

He rinses his hands, dries them on his apron, and takes up the brush.

Rowan waits where she always does, standing with one hip cocked, head low. She is older than most of them, broad through the barrel, her coat dappled with the beginnings of grey. She watches him approach with one dark eye, ears flicking forward and back.

"Alr–right," Jonas murmurs, "L–let's make you p–presentable."

He runs a hand down her shoulder first, letting her feel him before the brush touches coat. Her skin twitches under his palm, then settles. She exhales a long breath and shifts her weight. Jonas steps in close, careful to stay where she can see him, and begins slow, even strokes along her neck and flank. The brush rasps softly, a steady rhythm he has learned to keep.

The stable hums around them. Someone laughs near the doors. A bucket clatters against stone. The smell of feed and clean straw settles thick and familiar in the air. Jonas breathes it in and lets himself relax into the work, counting strokes without thinking about it.

Rowan's tail flicks once, then again, sharper this time. Jonas notices but doesn't tense. He adjusts his angle, shifts his feet, speaks softly, nonsense sounds meant only to keep his voice in her ear. Her ears tilt back, then forward again. He tells himself she's just irritable this morning. It happens. Older mares have moods. He has brushed worse.

A sudden sound carries down the aisle, louder than the rest. A sharp metallic clang as something is dropped in the yard. It echoes off the stone.

Rowan startles hard.

Everything happens at once.

She jerks sideways, muscles bunching under Jonas's hand. He instinctively steps back, turning to give her space, but his foot catches on the edge of the feed bench. He stumbles just enough to lose his clean line away from her hindquarters.

Rowan kicks.

It isn't a full strike. It's a reflexive snap of her leg, fast and brutal. The edge of her hoof catches Jonas along the outside of his thigh as he twists away. Initially there is no pain at all, only impact, a blunt shock that steals his breath and turns his legs weak, as if someone has struck him with a beam.

There is a sound— Something wet and *wrong*.

Jonas hits the ground on his side, breath knocked from him in a sharp, silent gasp. For a heartbeat he doesn't understand what's happened. His mind skids uselessly, searching for a shape to put around the sensation. Then the pain arrives, bright and immediate, radiating up his leg and into his gut like fire poured straight into his bones.

He looks down.

Blood is already soaking through the fabric of his trousers, dark and spreading with alarming speed and dripping onto the packed earth beneath him. The cut is long, jagged, laid open where the hoof glanced him, the cloth split as if by a blade.

“O–oh,” Jonas says faintly, the word barely more than air.

Rowan snorts, startled by the suddenness of it all, and stamps once. Jonas scrambles backward on his hands, heart hammering wildly, until his shoulders hit the stall wall. The movement sends a hot, tearing protest through his leg that makes his vision spark. He presses his palm clumsily against his thigh, more instinct than strategy, and sucks in a breath that shakes all the way down.

Someone shouts his name.

The stable, moments ago calm and ordinary, snaps into motion around him.

Hands are on him then, urging and half-dragging him clear of the stall. Jonas tries to help, tries to find his feet, but his leg buckles the moment weight touches it. A sound tears loose in his throat before he can stop it. He clamps his mouth shut and lets himself be hauled backward into the aisle, boots scraping uselessly against the stone.

Then Jonas notices the heat.

Not the sharpness yet, not really. Just heat, blooming outward from the place the hoof caught him, spreading fast and wrong through his

leg, as if the injury is alive and growing. His hand is slick when he presses it there, fingers sliding instead of finding purchase. Warmth coats his skin, his palm, his wrist. He tightens his grip anyway, jaw locking so hard his teeth ache.

The world feels tilted. Sounds come to him strangely, stretched and hollow, as if he's listening from the bottom of a well. Someone swearing. Rowan blowing hard through her nostrils. Hooves shifting nervously in nearby stalls. He can smell iron cutting through the hay and grain until it fills his mouth and nose.

He tells himself to breathe.

"Ngh… A-ah…"

The pain creeps and builds. It gathers itself with cruel patience, threading deeper, sharper, until each pulse of his heart sends a fresh surge through the wound. His leg throbs in time with it, a sickening, heavy rhythm that makes him dizzy.

His trousers are torn wide along the outside of his thigh, fabric dark and heavy with blood. Beneath it, the skin is split open in a long, uneven seam, edges already swelling, red and shining. He can see pale beneath the red when he looks too closely— Something that should not be visible. His stomach lurches. He looks away hard, blinking fast.

Jonas swallows. His mouth tastes like copper.

"I–it's," He starts, then stops. His voice won't quite come, stuck somewhere behind his ribs. He presses his back harder into the stall wall and draws his knees in as much as he can without screaming. The movement sends a new lance of pain through him, sharp enough that his vision tunnels and the edges of the world go dark.

Someone kneels in front of him. Esther, he later realizes, who practically dragged him out of Rowan's stall. She's pale and tight-lipped, "Don't move again. Don't— Jonas, don't look at it. Someone's getting Branwen and the estate physician. Just breathe."

He nods once, short and stiff. His hands are shaking now, the tremor running all the way up his arms, teeth chattering faintly despite his effort to stop it. He keeps his palms clamped over the wound anyway, pressure instinctive even as it burns and stings and feels horribly insufficient.

The pain crests.

It hits him like a wave breaking, sudden and overwhelming, tearing a sound out of his chest before he can stop it. He bites down hard, teeth clicking together, and the sound turns into a thin, broken breath instead.

"Haah… Agh—Haah…"

He feels distant from his body, as if the leg on the ground belongs to someone else and he is only watching it bleed.

Footsteps pound down the aisle.

"Where is he?"

Branwen's voice cuts through everything else, sharp with fear she doesn't bother to hide. It slices clean through the ringing in his ears,

through the chaos of sound and motion.

“Here— by the third stall,” Esther calls out.

Branwen skids to a stop in front of him and drops to her knees. Her hands are already moving, sure and practiced even as her eyes flick from his face to his leg and back again. For a split second she looks like she might say his name too loudly, like she might shout it into him just to keep him anchored.

“I’m here,” She says instead, steady and low, as if she can lay the words over him like a blanket, “You’re alright. Look at me.”

Jonas tries. His vision swims, dark spots blooming at the edges, but he finds her face and clings to it like a handhold in rough water.

“H–hurts,” He manages, the word scraped raw.

“I know,” She says immediately. One hand comes up to cradle the back of his head, fingers firm in his hair and grounding him. The other presses over his hands on his leg, adding pressure without pause or flinch. Her palm is warm. Solid. Blood seeps between their fingers anyway, slick and hot.

She doesn’t flinch.

“Physician’s coming,” Someone says behind her, “Ran straight for her.”

Branwen nods once, never taking her eyes off Jonas, “Good.”

His breathing is shallow now, fast and uneven, every inhale catching somewhere high in his chest. The world narrows to the feel of her hand at his neck, the rough boards digging into his back, the relentless throb in his leg that pulses in time with his heart.

“Stay with me,” She says quietly, “You hear me? Just stay.”

He nods again, a tiny movement that costs him, tears leaking steadily now without sound. He holds on, fingers curling into her sleeve like he might fall apart if he lets go.

The physician arrives at a run, hair already coming loose from its pins. She takes in the scene in a single glance: Jonas on the ground, Branwen braced beside him and pressing down on his leg that seeps blood.

“Hoof laceration,” Esther says tightly.

“I can see that,” The physician replies, already dropping to her knees. Her voice is brisk and practiced. Calm in the way of someone who has seen worse and expects to again, “Alright. We’re moving him.”

Jonas shakes his head immediately. The movement makes the world tilt again and the pain spike, white-hot and blinding. A small, helpless sound slips out of him before he can stop it. He clamps his jaw shut, breath coming too fast and shallow.

“Easy. We’ll do it slow,” Branwen murmurs, her hand firm at the back of his neck.

They shift him onto a low bench near the cooking hearth, closer to the light. Every movement sends pain tearing through his leg, raw and immediate, as if the wound is being reopened with each inch. Jonas curls forward instinctively, shoulders hunching and hands now scrabbling uselessly at Branwen's coat. His fingers knot in the fabric, clutching like a child. He goes stiff as a board, whole body locked against the agony.

"I know," She says again, voice low and relentless, pitched only for him, "I know. Look at me."

The physician doesn't waste time. She pulls a small knife from her bag and slices cleanly through the torn trouser leg, cutting it away entirely. The sound of fabric tearing is loud in Jonas's ears. Fabric peels back wetly, sticking for a moment before coming free.

Jonas sucks in a sharp, broken breath, chest hitching.

The wound looks worse in the open light. The cut runs long along the outside of his thigh, edges ragged where the hoof glanced and tore. Blood wells steadily, dark and thick, sliding down to pool beneath him. The skin around it is already angry and swollen, the muscle beneath twitching faintly in a way that makes his stomach roll.

The physician swears under her breath, "That's deep. Wide, too."

Jonas hears it dimly, as if through water. He is suddenly very aware of how cold he feels everywhere except the leg, which burns like it's been flayed and left exposed to the air.

"I'm going to clean it," The physician says to Branwen, "Then stitch.

He'll need something."

She uncorks a small bottle and tips a measure of laudanum into a cup, diluting it quickly with practiced motions, "This won't make it painless. Just slower."

Branwen nods once, "Give it."

Jonas barely manages to swallow when the cup is pressed to his lips. He coughs weakly, the bitter, cloying taste flooding his mouth and throat. It slides down heavy and unpleasant, sitting like a stone in his stomach, doing nothing at all at first.

The physician pours alcohol directly over the wound.

Jonas's body jerks violently before he can stop it, back arching and fingers spasming.

The pain is immediate and unbearable, a tearing, searing sensation that rips a cry out of him despite his clenched teeth. It comes out broken and high, humiliating in its rawness. His hands fly out blindly, grasping for anything solid, anything real, nails digging into cloth as if he might tear through it. He fully begins to cry, sobs breaking loose without restraint, tears streaming hot and fast down his face.

Branwen catches his face between her palms.

"Jonas," She says, firm now, words cutting clean through the chaos, "No. Look at me."

He tries. Gods, he tries. His eyes slide helplessly downward, dragged by some horrible need to see, to understand what's happening to him, to confirm the pain has a source. Branwen shifts closer, blocking his view entirely, her thumbs pressing gently but insistently into his cheeks until his gaze snags on hers and holds.

"Eyes up. Stay with me."

Tears spill freely, hot and unstoppable. His breathing comes in sharp, stuttering gasps, each one jarring the wound anew. The laudanum makes his head feel thick and slow, like he's sinking through syrup, but the pain cuts through it without mercy.

The physician works quickly and efficiently. She probes the wound, fingers firm and unapologetic, cleaning deeper than Jonas would have thought possible. Every touch sends fresh sparks of pain shooting up his leg. He sobs softly, the sound torn from him despite every instinct to swallow it down. His whole body shakes, muscles jumping uselessly under her hands, sweat breaking cold along his spine.

"Almost there," The physician says, brisk and encouraging in a way that doesn't quite ring true.

Jonas tries to answer her— tries to say something polite— but the words tangle before they ever reach his mouth. "I— I c–can—" His breath catches hard, the sentence collapsing into a strangled sound. He swallows and tries again, eyes squeezing shut, "S–s–s—"

"Shh," Branwen murmurs immediately, cutting it off before he can force himself further. Her thumbs brush gently under his eyes, wiping tears he doesn't even feel falling, "You don't need to talk. Just breathe. I'm here."

The needle bites.

Jonas cries out again, a thin, keening sound that seems to scrape his throat raw. His body bows forward with it, every instinct screaming to pull away. His nails dig into Branwen's sleeves, fingers clawing and desperate. She doesn't pull away. She leans in closer instead, bracing him with her own body, forehead nearly touching his.

"I've got you. You're not alone. I've got you."

He clings to her voice, to the solid warmth of her, to the press of her arms around him. His gaze wavers, dragged by pain and dizziness, but she keeps him with her, murmuring his name each time his focus slips. Tears stream unchecked down his face, soaking into her shoulder. His jaw trembles violently as stitch after stitch pulls the wound closed, each one a sharp, burning tug that makes his breath hitch.

"B–Br—" He tries, barely a whisper now.

"You're doing so well. Just a little longer."

The physician's hands move with practiced speed, "Hold still. Almost done now. Last few."

Jonas nods weakly, forehead knocking against Branwen's collarbone. He presses his face into her shoulder, eyes squeezed shut, and lets himself cry there, small broken sounds shaking out of him as his body finally gives up the fight. Each pull of the thread feels like fire, but it's distant now, as if happening to someone else just out of reach.

At last, mercifully, the tension eases.

“There,” The physician says, tying off the final knot, “That’s it.”

By the time she finishes bandaging the wound, Jonas is exhausted beyond anything he’s known. The pain still roars, but distantly now, muffled by shock and the creeping haze of the laudanum. His limbs feel heavy and unresponsive as he sags forward, pressing further into Branwen.

She wraps both arms around him without hesitation, one hand cradling the back of his head, the other firm and protective at his side. She holds him there, shielding him from the rest of the world while he shakes and breathes and survives it.

When Jonas wakes again, the pain is everywhere and nowhere.

It pulses dully in his leg, a deep, heavy ache that flares sharp if he shifts even a little. The bandaging is thick and tight, wrapped cleanly from hip to knee. He can feel the pull of the stitches beneath it, a constant reminder not to move, not to test what’s holding him together.

It takes a couple of seconds for him to realize that he is in his bed in the cottage.

The light through the window is different. Higher. Later. Time has passed without him, and the absence of it leaves him disoriented, as if he’s misplaced something important.

Jonas lies there staring at the ceiling, heart beating too fast, mind snagging on the wrong thing entirely.

I should be up. I need— I need to clean. And… And maybe get started on dinner—

The thought comes with a familiar spike of panic. His chest tightens. He flexes his hands, then tries to sit up without thinking, muscles already preparing for movement out of habit. Pain slams through him, white and immediate, stealing the air from his lungs. He gasps and collapses back against the mattress, breath stuttering and spots blooming in his vision.

“Don’t,” He suddenly hears Branwen say sharply.

She is already there, crossing the room in three long strides. She presses him back down with one broad hand to his shoulder, firm but careful, grounding him whether he wants it or not.

“Stay in bed. Relax,” She says, the words clipped with authority.

“I c–can—” His voice comes out thin and rough, “J–just l–light—”

“No.”

The word lands like a closed gate.

She sits on the edge of his bed and adjusts the blanket, tucking it more securely around his legs. Her movements are efficient and practiced, the same way she handles tack and wounds and stubborn animals. There is no uncertainty in her hands, no hesitation.

"You tore muscle," She says, "You've got stitches holding you together. You so much as pull wrong and we'll be back where we started."

He swallows. His hands knot in the blanket, fingers worrying the fabric, "I'm f–fine."

Branwen snorts softly, "You're terrible at lying," She studies him for a moment, then exhales and straightens, "I need to check on things. Make sure no one's set the place on fire while I was gone." Her gaze sharpens, "You don't move. Not an inch. I'll know."

She leaves him then, boots thudding away toward the door.

Jonas lies there, staring at the place she was. The cottage feels wrong with him in the bed in full daylight, like he's somewhere he doesn't belong yet. He listens for sounds of work, for voices, for the clatter of buckets or the distant bark of hounds. Each one twists something tight in his chest.

Minutes stretch.

He tries again to sit, slower this time, bracing himself carefully. The pain flares— Not as sharp, but deep and punishing, enough to make his vision swim. Sweat beads at his temples. He freezes, then gives up and sinks back against the pillows.

He stares at the wall instead.

The laundry flashes through his mind, hanging out there, damp and forgotten. He should collect it before it stiffens. He thinks of the pantry, of what's left, of what he could make for dinner if he started now. Something soft. Something warm. Something she'd eat without thinking about it.

The door opens. Branwen returns, eyes narrowing when she sees the tension still drawn tight across his face.

"Did you move."

He doesn't answer.

She exhales through her nose, "You're going to drive me mad."

"I sh–should be h–helping," He says finally, the words scraping out of him, "I w–worked after t–the can–caning—" He stops himself, eyes dropping.

"I know," She says, quieter now, "And that was wrong."

He looks at her then, really looks. Her jaw is set hard, anger flickering there— Not at him, but at the memory, at the idea of it.

"You don't have to earn rest," She continues, "Not with me. Not now. Not ever again."

She leaves again before he can respond, pulled back out into the yard by raised voices and responsibility. Jonas lies there, restless and miserable, staring at the door, listening to her come and go. Every time it opens, relief loosens something in his chest. Every time it closes, the room feels too still.

Eventually, the sounds outside shift. Voices thin. The yard settles into a quieter rhythm.

Branwen comes back in and shuts the door behind her.

She leans against it for a moment, rolling her shoulders like someone setting down a heavy pack. Then she looks at him and nods once.

“Alright. Everyone’s assigned. They don’t need me unless something’s on fire or bleeding.”

She crosses the room and sits beside him again, closer this time, her knee nearly brushing the bed.

“I’m staying.”

Jonas blinks, “Y–you d–don’t h–have to.”

She gives him a flat look, unimpressed and entirely unmoved, “No, I *do* have to,” Then, more quietly, as if surprised by herself but unwilling to take it back, “I have to take care of you. What good am I if I can’t even take care of the man I love?”

Jonas's face goes pink immediately, colour creeping up from his collar to his ears. He opens his mouth, his breath catching somewhere in the middle, "Y–you c–can't j–just—" He starts, strangled voice coming out helplessly fond, "S–say th–things l–like th–that."

She huffs, the corner of her mouth twitching, "Watch me."

He lets out a small laugh before he can stop it, ducking his head, "Y–you're g–going t–to k–kill m–me."

"No I wouldn't. The horses would do you in before I did," She says dryly, then leans in and presses a brief kiss to his cheek. When she pulls back, there's a faint flush high on her own cheekbones, her eyes flicking away for just a moment before she schools her expression again.

Branwen then reaches out and takes his hand, thumb brushing gently over his knuckles. Her grip is steady and anchoring. He grips back without thinking, grounding himself in the warmth of her skin and the quiet certainty of her presence.

That's when he notices the scent. Baked apples and honey, clinging faintly to her clothes beneath the ever-present leather and hay.

Evidently noticing his brief flicker of confusion, Branwen says, "I went to the kitchens. Maud tried to tell me it was for the steward's table only. I told her she could take it up with me or get out of my way. And then I took this."

She reaches down to the pack she sat down, taking out a bundle of cloth and unwraps it. Inside is a soft roll split and filled with stewed

apples and honey, the edges crisped just enough. Steam curls faintly from it, the scene sickeningly sweet.

Jonas's eyes go wide, "Miss Br–Branwen—"

"Eat," She says, already nudging it closer to him, "Physician said you need it."

He takes it with careful hands, as if it might vanish if he grips too hard. The first bite nearly undoes him. His eyes flutter shut and a small, helpless sound slips out of him before he can stop it, something halfway between a sigh and a whine. His cheeks flush more deeply.

She watches him with a faint, smug curl to her mouth, "That good?"

He nods with his mouth full, entirely incapable of speech.

While he eats, she stands and moves around the cottage, straightening what doesn't need it, before setting the kettle on, "Anything pressing?" She asks over her shoulder, "Laundry. Floors. You leave something half-done?"

"L–Laundry," He says quickly, panic flickering, "I c–can d–do—"

She shoots him a look over her shoulder, "Jonas."

He falters, shrinking back into the pillows.

“I’ve got the stables covered,” She continues, “Cooking’s handled. Cleaning’s handled, including laundry. Esther’s on feed and Brenna’s on turnout. You’re not needed.”

“I c–can’t h–have you d–doing a–all of that f–for m–me,” He blurts, distress sharp in his voice.

“Too late.”

She pours hot water into a cup, adds a measure of something herbal the physician left behind, and brings it over. She holds the cup steady while he drinks, adjusting her grip when his hands tremble.

“Oh,” She adds casually, as if mentioning the weather, “And for the record— *Lady* Rowan’s dogmeat after that little stunt.”

Jonas freezes.

The colour drains from his face so fast it’s almost impressive, “Y–you’re n–not—”

Branwen swears softly and reaches out, cupping his cheek and turning his face back toward her before he can spiral, “No. Gods, no. I’m not killing any horses.”

He exhales in a shaky rush, shoulders sagging, eyes glassy, “D–don’t j–joke ab–about that.”

“I know,” She says, gentler now, “Bad joke.”

She brushes her thumb under his eye where tears have gathered, unhurried and unapologetic. No teasing. No embarrassment. Just care.

"Rest," She tells him, "I'll be here."

Branwen keeps count of the day by what Jonas needs.

Water first, when the sun starts to slide lower and the light in the cottage softens from bright to gold. Then broth again, thickened this time, coaxed into him a few careful spoonfuls at a time when his stomach finally stops roiling. She dabs a cloth at his brow, checks the bandaging without touching more than she has to, listens to the way his breathing evens out and then hitches again when the pain spikes.

He sleeps in fits. Wakes. Drifts. Startles once, reaching for her with a small, panicked sound, and she catches his hand before he can fully surface.

"Easy. I'm here," There comes a time where she loses count how often she says those three words.

The cottage shifts around them as evening comes on. Shadows lengthen along the floor. The hearth gets coaxed back to life, a low, steady fire that throws warmth without glare. The place smells faintly of herbs now, of honey and clean linen, of the sharp tang of alcohol that still lingers under it all. It smells lived in. It smells like *theirs.*

She sits in the chair beside the bed more than she stands, one boot hooked under the rung, elbows braced on her knees. Every so often

she reaches out to rest a hand on Jonas's shoulder or forearm, just to remind him she's still there. Just to remind herself.

There's a knock at the door as the light starts to fade for real.

Branwen stiffens on instinct, already concerned there may be an emergency needing her attention, then relaxes when she hears Esther's voice through the wood, "It's us."

She opens the door to find Esther and Brenna both standing there, hats in hand, the day's dust still clinging to their trousers. Esther looks tired but alert, eyes immediately cutting past Branwen's shoulder toward the bed. Brenna has that careful, uncertain expression she gets when she's trying not to intrude.

"He awake?" Brenna asks quietly.

"In and out," Branwen says. She steps aside without really thinking about it, letting them in.

Jonas stirs at the sound of voices, lashes fluttering. When he focuses enough to see them, his mouth curves into a small, shy smile.

"H–hi," He murmurs.

Brenna's face softens immediately. She comes closer, stopping short of the bed like she's afraid of crossing some invisible line, "You look like hell."

Jonas huffs a weak, breathless laugh.

Esther sets the small bundle she's brought on the table, "We brought some extra bread. And jam. From earlier. Thought you might— well." She trails off, shrugging.

"Good," Branwen says gruffly, "He'll eat it when he can."

She catches herself then, standing there with her hands on her hips like this is *hers* to manage. Like this is a household, not just a sickbed. The thought doesn't sit badly. It settles, solid and quiet. They don't stay long. Esther asks after the leg, listens when Branwen answers, nods at the right places. Brenna tells Jonas the hounds all went out fine, that the older lookout gave her trouble at the gate and looked smug about it. Jonas's eyes light a little at that, fond even through the haze.

When they leave, Esther squeezes Branwen's arm on the way past.

"You're doing good," She says, low enough that Jonas can't hear.

Branwen grunts in reply, but she doesn't pull away.

Not long after, there's another knock.

Branwen looks up from where she's been rinsing a cloth and says, "Come in," without raising her voice.

The man who steps into the cottage isn't from the stables. He wears

the livery of the main house, neat but worn at the cuffs, cap held awkwardly in both hands like he isn't sure what to do with them. He's young, a little round-shouldered, with the look of someone who learned early to stay out of the way.

"Ah—sorry," He says, glancing from Branwen to the bed and then quickly back to the floor, "I was told I could… I mean. I just wanted to check."

Jonas blinks, then recognition flickers across his face. He lifts his head a little, "I–Isembard," His voice is rough but unmistakably pleased.

Isembard's shoulders loosen at once, "Yeah. Hi," He clears his throat, "Maud said you'd been hurt. Thought I'd come see for myself. Didn't bring anything—I wasn't sure if—"

"That's fine," Branwen says, "Thanks for coming by."

Isembard nods, grateful for the permission to exist in the room. He edges a step closer, still careful not to stare at Jonas's leg. "You had everyone in the west wing convinced you were made of iron," He says, attempting a smile, "I told them no one scrubs floors like that unless they're mortal."

Jonas huffs softly, something like a laugh, "Y–you sh–should see h–him t–try to f–fold sh–sheets," He says, eyes flicking toward Branwen before dropping again, shy but fond.

Isembard grins, "Unfair. You're the one who taught me."

Branwen watches the exchange in silence, something easing in her

chest. Isembard was hired to take Jonas's place in the main house after the reassignment— Another quiet young man set to fill a space too large for one person. Jonas had taken to him almost immediately. Answered his careful questions. Shown him how to stretch soap, how to air linen properly, how to move through the corridors without drawing the wrong kind of notice. Isembard, shy in his own way, had listened without flinching at the stutter, never rushing him, never pretending not to hear.

She's seen them together since, heads bent over some small task, speaking in low voices. Seen Jonas, on the rare evenings they have time, invite him along with Esther and Brenna to share a meal or sit in the grass with bread and apples like they're ordinary people with ordinary friends.

Once, that would have been unthinkable.

Now here he is, trading quiet jabs, recognised, missed… And not alone anymore.

"Well," Isembard says after a moment, rubbing the back of his neck, "I won't keep you. Just— Get better. They've got me doing your old rounds and I'll admit, I don't know how you kept up."

Jonas lifts a hand in a small, wavering wave, "Th–thanks f–for c–coming."

Isembard nods back, "Any time."

He takes himself off, closing the door softly behind him.

Branwen exhales and turns back toward the bed, unable to quite hide the small, satisfied curl at the corner of her mouth. She goes back to her chair. She watches the fire. Listens to Jonas's breathing as he gradually falls back to sleep. When he stirs, she's already there, adjusting the blanket, offering water, and murmuring reassurance without thinking about it first.

Outside, the estate settles into night. Somewhere distant, a gate closes and a hound barks once and then falls silent.

The next three days blur together into a narrow, relentless rhythm.

Branwen measures them by small victories. Jonas keeping broth down. Jonas sleeping for more than an hour at a stretch. Jonas waking without that sharp, hunted look in his eyes. She does not tell him she's counting. She just stays. The pain never truly leaves him. She can see it in the way his breath catches when he shifts, the way his hands tighten in the blankets when he thinks she's not looking. Even the idea of standing draws his shoulders in, like his body knows better than to try.

She's at the small table, grinding dried herbs the physician left, when she notices it: The stillness gone wrong. Jonas has been staring at the ceiling too long, jaw set hard, fingers twisted white-knuckled in the blanket. He keeps swallowing, like he's bracing for something.

"Miss… B–Branwen," He says at last, barely audible.

She looks up immediately, "What is it?"

His colour climbs fast, right up to the roots of his hair. He turns his face slightly away, throat working, "I— I n–need t–to—" The words collapse on themselves. He stops, breath hitching, humiliation plain as

day.

It doesn't take her long to understand.

She doesn't comment, she's already moving.

"Alright," She says evenly, like he's asked her to fetch water, "Don't try to get up."

She reaches under the bed and pulls the bedpan free, setting it aside while she shifts pillows and clears space with brisk, practised movements, doing what the physician had shown her earlier. Jonas is burning red now, ears bright as coals.

"I'm s–sorry," He blurts, "I sh–shouldn't— I c–can w–wait—"

"No. You shouldn't. And you won't."

She helps him shift, one arm braced behind his shoulders, the other steady at his hip. Even that small movement costs him; he gasps, fingers clawing at the sheets, a broken sound slipping out before he can stop it.

"Easy," She murmurs, "I've got you."

He shakes as she helps him settle, face turned sharply toward the wall, eyes fixed there as if dignity might still be salvaged if he doesn't look at her. When the bedpan is in place, he's trembling outright, jaw locked so tight she can see the muscle jump. She turns her back at

once and gives him what privacy the small room allows. She folds her arms and waits. She's done this before.

The memory comes unbidden— Jonas caned. He had been rigid with pain and shame then too, bare and wounded and apologizing for existing while she applied ointment to his striped skin. He'd survived that. He'll survive this.

It takes time.

"I— I'm f–finished," He says at last, his words scraped thin.

"Alright," She answers, and turns back immediately.

Helping him back is worse. His leg protests the shift, pain flaring hot and bright. Sweat beads along his hairline. A small, involuntary sound tears out of him, sharp with misery.

"I know," She says quietly, bracing him until he's settled against the pillows again, "Almost there."

She removes the bedpan without comment, empties it in the outhouse and returns, then straightens the blankets with careful hands, making sure nothing pulls or presses where it shouldn't. Only when he's fully settled does she pause, one hand braced on the edge of the bed.

Jonas lies staring at the ceiling, chest rising and falling too fast, eyes bright with exhaustion and lingering shame.

“Th–thank y–you,” He whispers hoarsely.

She grunts, the sound rough but not dismissive, “I’ve helped you through worse.”

Then she pulls her chair closer to the bed and sits, close enough that he knows she’s there.

And she stays until he falls into a proper, deep sleep.

The physician comes again on the next day. Each time she visits she unwraps the bandaging, cleans the wound, checks for heat, swelling, or foul smell. Jonas endures it stiffly and Branwen remains close, one hand always somewhere he can feel it— His shoulder, his wrist, the back of his neck.

“It’s clean,” The physician says on the third visit, satisfaction threading her voice, “Deep, but clean. You’re lucky.”

Jonas doesn’t look convinced.

“How l–long,” He asks, the question dragged out of him like something painful, “Unt–til I c–can—”

“Two weeks before we even talk about stitches coming out. Longer before work. A month at least before you do anything strenuous. No lifting. No animals.”

She says it kindly. It still lands like a blow. Branwen sees it

immediately, the way his shoulders slump, the way his hands curl into the blanket as if it's the only thing keeping him tethered. He nods, obedient as ever, but his mouth trembles.

After the physician leaves, he stares at the wall for a long time.

"If I w–weren't w–with y–you," He murmurs eventually, voice small and steady in the worst way, "I d–don't th–think I'd h–have a j–job a–anymore."

Branwen's chest tightens sharply. She moves without thinking, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking his face gently but firmly in her hands, forcing him to look at her. He startles at the contact, eyes flicking to hers.

"That's not true. And even if it were, it wouldn't matter. You're here. You're mine. No one's throwing you out because you got hurt doing your job. Besides, I'm sure The Lady knows she would have much explaining to do if she earned my deep and lasting displeasure."

There is the faintest edge of humour in her voice, as if she is perfectly aware of how absurd it is to threaten a woman like The Lady and intends him to hear the joke in it. It is the sort of humour she only ever uses when she is very certain of herself.

Branwen isn't sure he hears it.

His breath hitches instead when she says *you're mine,* a quiet, startled, almost *pleased* sound. Heat crawls up his neck and ears and she feels it beneath her palms, skin going hot and oversensitive all at once. His eyes go unfocused, as if he's been struck with something too sudden to understand, and his fingers curl weakly into the sheets, searching for purchase, as if he doesn't know where else to put the feeling crowding

his chest.

"...I c–can't n–not w–work," He says, small and earnest, clearly answering a different fear entirely.

Something in her softens. A flicker of fond and helpless amusement. The corner of her mouth lifts.

"I know," She says, quieter now, "But you still don't get a choice in that. Rest."

Her thumb gently brushes once along his jaw, a wordless promise that she is not going anywhere simply because he cannot stand on his own two feet at the moment.

She proves it in a hundred small ways.

She continues to feed him when his hands shake too badly to manage the spoon. Changes his bandages when the physician isn't there, careful and unflinching. Helps him wash, even when he is mortified and trembling and apologizing the entire time, even when his voice breaks on the words and he has to stop and breathe through it, even when he turns his face away as if shame might be something she could catch if he lets her see him too clearly.

She sleeps lightly, half-awake to every change in his breathing, every small sound of pain, counting the hours by his breaths, measuring the night by whether he is still warm beneath her hand.

By the time the worst of the nights loosens its grip, the feverish edge has gone from him. His skin is no longer burning, his breaths no

longer sharp and erratic. He drifts in and out of sleep, restless but no longer as often or fighting some unseen thing inside himself.

It is during another night when he finally stirs properly.

Branwen moves through her usual routine by habit more than need: Banking the hearth down to coals, setting water to warm for the morning, checking the latch on the door. The motions steady her, familiar as breath.

Behind her, Jonas is awake. When she finally turns, she finds him staring at the ceiling, hands folded tight over the blanket as if holding himself in place.

“Are you in pain?” She asks softly.

He startles, like he’s been caught doing something wrong, then shakes his head too quickly to be convincing, “N–no. I m–mean— a l–little. J–just—” His voice thins out, the rest swallowed. His cheeks colour, that familiar flush creeping up as soon as attention lands on him.

“You’ve been shifting. You don’t do that unless something’s off.”

He worries at the edge of the blanket, folding and unfolding it between his fingers. The motion is small and restless, like he’s bracing himself.

For a while he says nothing at all.

Then, so quietly she almost misses it, “C–can I a–ask y–you s–something?”

She immediately moves to sit on the edge of her own bed and turns fully toward him, giving him her whole attention, “You know you can ask me anything.”

That seems to make it worse. His face goes red in earnest now, colour climbing up his neck, ears burning. He stares hard at his hands, at the blanket, anywhere but her. When he speaks again, each word is careful, halting, as if he’s stepping across ice he expects to crack.

“I—I w–was j–just th–thinking,” He begins, then stops. Swallows. Starts again, “M–my l–leg… it h–hurts m–more at n–night. A–and I—” His breath catches. He doesn’t quite lose it, but it’s close, “I c–can’t s–sleep v–very w–well.”

Branwen doesn’t interrupt. She lets the quiet hold, lets him know she’s listening.

The pause stretches. His shoulders creep up toward his ears, tension winding tight. Then he squeezes his eyes shut and forces the rest out in a rush, like pulling a splinter free.

“W–would y–you— j–just— s–stay w–ith m–me? In b–bed. J–just t–to s–leep,” His hands flutter uselessly, “J–just f–for c–comfort.”

The silence that follows is brief, but to him it’s clearly endless. She can see it in the way his body locks, the way he braces, already preparing himself to apologise, to retreat, to take the request back if he can.

She stands.

He opens his eyes at the sound, anxiety flashing bright and sharp, until the mattress dips beside him. She settles carefully on the edge of his bed, mindful of his leg, close enough now that he has to look at her.

“You could have just said you’re hurting,” She says gently.

“I— I k–know,” He whispers, “I j–just d–didn’t w–want t–to—”

“Bother me?” She supplies.

He nods, the very picture of misery.

She exhales through her nose and reaches out, brushing her thumb once over his knuckles, “Jonas. You’re allowed to need things. Especially now.”

He looks at her then, properly, searching her face like he’s expecting to find disappointment there. What he finds instead makes his breath hitch.

“You’re asking me to lie beside you. That’s it,” A faint tilt of her mouth, “If anyone’s honour is at risk, it’s mine.”

The sound he makes is small and surprised, a fragile huff of laughter that seems to catch him off guard. She rises again, blows out on the bedside table, then slips off her boots. When she climbs into his bed,

she does it carefully, moving slow, giving him time to adjust. The mattress dips again, warmer now, fuller.

He goes rigid for a bit. Then, gradually, cautiously, he softens.

“Is this— Is th–this a–all r–ight?”

She shifts closer, “Tell me if it isn’t.”

After a moment, he inches toward her, tentative as a skittish animal. His hand brushes her sleeve by accident and he freezes like he’s been struck. She closes the distance herself then, sliding an arm around his shoulders and drawing him gently in. He makes a small, startled sound, then melts against her with a shuddering breath, face awkwardly tucked against her collarbone.

“Oh,” He murmurs, “Th–that’s—”

“Okay,” She finishes quietly.

Branwen lies there, very still at first, aware of every place they touch and every place they don’t. Jonas is warm against her, lighter than she expects, his breath uneven for a few moments before it evens out. She can feel it where his cheek rests against her collarbone, soft huffs of air warming her skin, each one loosening something tight in her chest. He smells faintly of soap and clean linen, with the ghost of the ointment the physician left behind. It is an absurdly domestic scent. It makes her throat ache.

She keeps her arm steady around him, not tightening, not loosening, letting him set the terms even in sleep. His fingers twitch once, then

curl again in the fabric of her shirt, knuckles brushing her ribs. Not grasping. Just there. As if checking she hasn't gone anywhere. The trust in that small, unconscious gesture hits her harder than any declaration could. She tilts her head just enough to rest her cheek against his hair, careful not to wake him, and lets herself breathe him in.

She doesn't sleep much herself that night. She listens to the hitch and smooth of his breathing, feels the warmth of him pressed close, memorizes the way his fingers curl faintly in her shirt even in sleep, like he's afraid she'll vanish if he lets go entirely. Once, she adjusts the blanket. Once, she shifts just enough to ease the strain on his leg. That's all. It's enough.

Weeks pass.

Healing, she learns, is rarely dramatic. It's slow and incremental and maddeningly quiet. Jonas regains colour before confidence. Strength before ease. He moves more each day, but always carefully, always watching her face for signs he's gone too far.

By the time the physician declares the stitches ready to come out, Jonas looks like someone heading to a gallows rather than a chair by the window.

They've set him up as comfortably as possible. Cushions are stacked, his leg stretched and supported, the chair angled to catch the best light of the afternoon. The physician approves of the light. Nods once, satisfied.

Jonas clearly does not approve of any of it.

Branwen watches how he sits rigid, hands folded neatly in his lap like

they might misbehave if he doesn't keep an eye on them. His shoulders are tight, his jaw set, eyes fixed firmly on the opposite wall.

"You don't have to look," Branwen says for the third time, standing just to his side.

"I'm n–not," He says, but his gaze promptly flicks straight down to his leg. He winces and snaps his eyes back up, mortified, "I m–meant— I w–wasn't g–going t–to—"

She huffs softly.

The physician kneels and begins unwrapping the bandage. The wound beneath is clean now, closed into a long, angry line, puckered where the stitches still hold. Branwen doesn't look at it. She watches Jonas instead and sees the way his face drains of colour the moment skin is exposed.

He swallows hard.

Esther and Brenna hover near the table, pretending to be very interested in nothing at all. Isembard lingers closer to the door, hands clasped behind his back and eyes resolutely fixed on the window like the leg might leap at him if he glances sideways.

"We brought moral support," Esther says brightly. "And bread."

"And instructions," Brenna deadpans, "Don't pass out. That'd be inconvenient."

Jonas manages a weak, breathy laugh that wobbles into a shaky exhale, “Th–thank y–you.”

The physician snips the first stitch.

Jonas jolts, a sharp breath pulled tight in his chest. His fingers curl hard around the arm of the chair, knuckles paling. Branwen moves immediately, laying her hand over his, “Easy. You’re doing fine.”

“I d–don’t l–like th–that,” He whispers, eyes squeezed shut now, chin trembling

“Almost there,” The physician says, “You’ve healed well. Try to keep still.”

He nods, stiff with effort. It looks like he’ll manage it.

Then his eyes dip again.

The regret is immediate and unmistakable. It’s written across his face before he drags his gaze back up, breathing too fast.

“Oh—” The sound slips out of him, “Th–that’s— I sh–shouldn’t—”

Branwen steps closer without comment, her body blocking his view. She cups the side of his face and turns him gently toward her, “Hey. Eyes up.”

He obeys immediately, breath hitching as his focus locks on her, “S–sorry… For b–being a m–mess.”

She snorts, “You got kicked by a horse.”

Another stitch comes free. Then another. Jonas flinches each time, a quiet sound caught in the back of his throat, but he doesn’t pull away. He stays exactly where he is, hand clenched in hers, eyes fixed on her face like it’s the only thing keeping him upright.

Behind them, Esther makes a soft sound, “I can’t even watch,” She mutters.

Isembard clears his throat and follows suit, staring very hard at the floor, “I—I’ll just— yes. Floor’s very… floor-like.”

Brenna’s tone tells Branwen she’s very unimpressed with the two of them, “You two are hopeless. Especially you, Esther. You’ve seen *much* worse,” She, at least, approaches and squints at the leg, “That’s going to scar.”

Jonas makes a small, distressed noise. “I kn–know.”

Branwen fixes Brenna with a flat look who in turn has enough sense to look sheepish and back off.

Before long, the physician ties off the last thread and sits back, “That’s it. Stitches are out. Keep it clean, keep it dry. Gentle movement only. No heroics.”

Jonas exhales in a long, shaky rush, shoulders sagging like something inside him has finally unclenched.

“It’s d–done?” He asks incredulously.

“It’s done,” Branwen says, squeezing his hand once.

Esther claps softly, “See? Survived.”

Brenna nods, “Told you not to pass out. Though Isembard is looking a little queasy.”

Isembard huffs and waves her off, but evidently needs to lean against a table and looks like he’s about to faint.

Jonas manages a small, tired smile at all of them, cheeks still flushed, “Th–thank y–you f–for c–coming.”

“Course,” Brenna says easily, “You’re one of us now.”

The words land. Branwen sees it, in the way his eyes soften, the way his shoulders ease just a fraction more, like something he didn’t realize he’d been bracing for has finally let go.

When the physician packs up and the others linger a while longer— talking about nothing important, about hounds and feed and the weather— Jonas sits quietly, leg aching but whole, surrounded.

Branwen stays close, her hand never leaving his, and thinks that healing isn't just about flesh knitting back together.

Some things mend wider than that.

Evenings settle differently now.

Jonas notices it the moment Branwen comes in later than usual, boots dusty, jacket smelling faintly of leather and cold air instead of soap and herbs. She looks tired in the good way, not the tight, worried exhaustion she carried those first days after he was kicked. She eats standing at the table. She checks her knife. She talks briefly about the kennels, about patrol routes, about a hound with a limp that isn't healing right.

She has stopped hovering and gone back to some of her duties as Hunting Marshal.

He tells himself this is good. It means he's better. It means she trusts him not to fall apart the moment she looks away.

Still, something in his chest aches when she blows out the lamp on her side of the room and moves toward her own bed without that habitual glance back at him. He sits on the edge of his mattress, easing his leg down carefully. It twinges, sharp but brief. He waits for it to pass. It does. Another small victory. He washes at the basin by himself, dries his hands, changes his shirt without needing help to steady him.

He should feel proud.

Instead, he feels hollow.

It's only once he's lying back, staring at the ceiling, that the truth presses in on him. It isn't the pain he misses. It's her weight beside him. Her arm around his shoulders. The way the dark felt less wide when she was there. The wanting has been there for days now, quiet and insistent. He's been careful not to name it, not to look at it too closely. Wanting feels greedy. Improper. Especially now, when she no longer *needs* to be there.

That's the part that makes his stomach twist.

He lies there listening to the sounds of her settling across the room. The creak of her bed, the rustle of blankets. The space between them feels enormous tonight, an empty thing he can't stop noticing.

He realizes, with a flush of shameful clarity, that he wants her in his bed again.

Not because he hurts.

Because he wants her close.

The thought sits heavy and frightening in his chest. He rolls onto his side, presses his face into the pillow, and tries to breathe past it. He tells himself not to be ridiculous. Not to be demanding. She's already given him more than anyone ever has.

Still— *still.*

He turns the idea over and over, worrying at it like a loose thread, until the wanting outweighs the fear. By the time he speaks, he's already rehearsed the words a dozen times and hates all of them.

"Miss Br–Branwen?" His voice sounds too loud in the dim.

"Mm?"

"I—" He swallows, throat tight. He sits up slightly, heart thudding hard enough he's sure she can hear it, "C–can I a–ask y–you s–something?"

There's a soft exhale from her side of the room, "You don't have to whisper like you're confessing to murder."

That almost undoes him. He manages a weak, breathy sound that might be a laugh if he were braver. He watches Branwen sit up in the dark, turning toward him. He can feel her attention now, and it makes the words stick even worse.

"I kn–know y–you d–don't n–need t–to… I m–mean— I kn–know I'm b–better. A–and y–you've g–got w–work a–again. I d–don't—" His hands knot in the blanket, "I d–don't w–want t–to b–be a b–burden," He forces himself to look at her direction, cheeks burning. "I j–just… I l–liked h–having y–you th–there."

He rushes on before he can lose his nerve.

"N–not b–because I h–hurt. I'm f–fine. I m–mean— n–not f–fine, b–but

—” He grimaces, “I j–just s–sleep b–better. W–with y–you.”

Silence stretches. His heart hammers so hard it makes his ears ring.

Branwen shifts, the mattress creaking as she stands. For one horrible moment he’s certain he’s misstepped, asked too much, ruined everything; still fearing despite how much they’ve been through together.

Then she speaks, low and thoughtful, “You don’t need me to watch over you anymore.”

“I kn–know,” He says quickly, “Th–that’s n–not—”

She crosses the room before he can finish, stopping at the side of his bed. He tilts his head up to look at her, pulse skidding, seeing her clearer now that she’s close.

“You’re asking because you want company,” She says.

He nods helplessly, “Y–yes.”

“And you’re not asking because you think you ought to.”

“No.” The word comes out stronger than he expects, “I w–want t–to.”

Something in her expression softens.

“Alright. Then say that next time.”

“I—” His voice shakes, “I w–want y–you t–to s–sleep h–here. P–Please…”

She studies him for a long moment, then huffs quietly, “You could have led with that.”

“I d–didn’t w–know h–how.”

A corner of her mouth lifts, “Fair,” She steps closer, gestures with her chin, “Move over.”

For a second, he doesn’t understand. Then his brain catches up all at once and he scrambles awkwardly to make space, hands clumsy with nerves. Branwen climbs in beside him, still visibly careful of his leg, settling on top of the blankets. The bed dips, warm and solid and suddenly *shared again.* He stares at the wall, convinced that if he looks at her directly he’ll burst into flames.

“Company,” She says quietly, “That’s what you’re asking for.”

“Y–yes.”

She shifts closer, close enough that her arm brushes his.

Jonas exhales and lets himself lean the smallest bit toward her, then

lies very still. He stares into the dark, waiting for sleep to take him the way it usually does once exhaustion wins. It doesn't. His body is too awake. His mind won't settle. The bed feels wrong and right at the same time—too narrow, too full, aware of itself in a way beds have never been before.

Branwen is beside him. Again. But this is *different.*

Not touching. Not quite. Not like last time. But close enough that he can feel her through the thin boundary of air and blanket. Her presence has weight. Warmth. Every breath she takes shifts the mattress just enough to remind him that this isn't imagined, that she didn't change her mind once the lamp went out.

He swallows and tells himself to think of something else. Anything else. The kennels. Feed tallies. The pattern of cracks in the plaster. The way the hearth sounds when it settles.

Instead, his thoughts circle her like moths.

He knows where she is without looking. Knows the line of her shoulder, the way her arm lies folded near her chest. He knows all too well her scent— soap, woodsmoke, the faint iron tang of outdoors. It's everywhere. It feels like it's in his lungs.

His heart won't slow.

His grandfather's voice rises unbidden in his head, all sharp whispers and warding signs. *"Fair folk,"* He would say. *"They slip thoughts into young men's heads when they're tired and weak. Best blame them and move on."*

Yes. That must be it. Jonas swallows and breathes out slowly, deliberately. Fair folk, then. Mischief-makers. Tricksters. It is much easier to bear the thought if it isn't entirely his own. But— *No.* This is something else entirely, a restless pull low in his body, a warmth that spreads slowly, almost politely at first, like it's asking permission.

He does not give it any. He stays perfectly still, rigid with concentration, convinced that if he moves even a fraction it will become obvious. Ridiculous. As if she's watching him. As if she could *see* his… troubles in the dark.

The thought alone sends another rush of heat through him.

Oh no.

He squeezes his eyes shut and exhales carefully through his nose, the way he does when he's trying to calm himself before speaking. In, out. Count the breaths. Pretend nothing is happening.

It doesn't help.

The warmth gathers *down there.* Sharpens. His body responds with an abrupt, humiliating certainty that makes his breath hitch. He freezes, panic flaring hot and fast.

No. No, no—

He clamps down on the thought immediately, horrified, shame flooding him from scalp to toes. This is not allowed. Not now. Not like this. She is right there. She trusted him. He asked for comfort, not for *— this.*

He shifts minutely, trying to create distance without making a show of it. The movement pulls at his leg, just enough to sting.

A small sound slips out of him.

Branwen stirs.

At first it's just a change in her breathing, a deeper inhale, then the mattress dips as she turns toward him. He holds himself rigid, heart slamming painfully against his ribs.

"Jonas," she murmurs, voice low and rough with sleep, "Still awake?"

The words land far too close. He feels them more than hears them.

"I—" He startles, the sound catching halfway out of him, "I— I m–mean— y–yes. S–sorry."

"You keep apologizing like you've committed a crime."

"I f–feel l–like I h–have," He admits weakly.

She shifts again, settling onto her side, facing him fully now. In the faint spill of moonlight from the window, he can just make out the curve of her cheek, the line of her nose. Her eyes catch the light when she looks at him.

“For what?” She asks.

He swallows hard, “F–for k–keeping y–you a–awake.”

“I wasn’t really asleep. You’ve been breathing like you’re waiting for something to jump out at you.”

Mortification blooms fast and bright, “I— I d–don’t—”

“I’m teasing,” She adds, quickly, “Mostly.”

Mostly.

The word sticks in his chest.

She studies him for a moment, then her expression softens, “Is it your leg?”

“N–no,” He says too fast, “I m–mean— a l–little. B–but it’s f–fine.”

She doesn’t look convinced, but she doesn’t push either, “You want another pillow?”

“No.”

“The salve?”

“N–no.”

She raises an eyebrow, “Then what’s wrong?”

Everything, he thinks helplessly.

A traitorous tightening low in his body, the steady presence of her breathing. The fact that she is here because he asked, because she chose to be. His body reacts as if it has been waiting for permission he never consciously gave. It’s not sharp pain or pleasure exactly, just an insistent, humiliating pressure in his lower half, a pull that won’t ease no matter how carefully he stills himself. He presses his knees together instinctively, as if that might hide it.

He can’t tell her. Not this. Not when the truth feels so embarrassing he can barely breathe around it. He goes very still, breath shallow, terrified that any movement will make it worse. That she’ll notice. That she already has. His face burns so hot it feels like it must be visible even in the dim.

“I d–don’t kn–know,” He says finally, because saying *anything* else feels impossible, and the truth sits like a stone behind his teeth.

She watches him quietly, giving him space. She doesn’t crowd him, doesn’t demand. That somehow hurts more than if she did. It makes the ache in his chest sharper, more exposed.

“Jonas,” She says after a beat, gentler now, “You don’t have to disappear on me.”

That does it.

The words crack something open. He can't keep bracing forever. He can't pretend his body isn't doing exactly what it's doing. His throat tightens, and when he speaks again his voice barely holds together.

"I— I d–didn't th–think it w–would f–feel l–like th–this."

Her brow furrows, concern flickering first, "Like what?"

He squeezes his eyes shut, mortified beyond recovery. His shoulders hunch, as if he can fold himself small enough to vanish, "L–like I c–can't t–turn m–my b–body o–off."

The silence that follows feels enormous.

He risks a glance at her and nearly stops breathing.

She's gone very still. Not alarmed. Not angry. Just caught off balance, in a way he's never seen from her before. The confidence she usually wears so easily has slipped, just a little. Her ears have gone faintly pink. One hand lifts and rubs at the back of her neck, a gesture she makes when she's thinking hard or trying not to show nerves.

"Oh," she says, then he watches with increasing embarrassment when her eyes flick down and she sees it, *"Oh."*

It's quiet. Surprised. Careful. The confirmation hits him like a blow. She knows. She *knows,* and the shame floods hot and fast, making his

eyes sting.

He makes a miserable sound, “I’m s–so s–sorry. I d–didn’t m–mean— I w–wasn’t—”

“Hey,” She interrupts softly.

The firmness in that single word stops him cold.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” She says, clearly now, steadying herself as much as him, “That just… happens.” She hesitates, then adds, a little awkwardly, “At–At least, that’s what I’ve been told about… men.”

Sometimes. With her.

The thought sends another sharp, unwelcome jolt through him, and he turns his face away immediately, mortified beyond words. His voice comes out thin and wrecked, “I th–think I sh–should m–move.”

Her hand hovers, then settles lightly on his hip, “Don’t. Not if you don’t want to.”

He shakes his head, overwhelmed by the contradiction tearing through him. Want and panic tangled together until he can’t tell which is louder, “I d–do w–want— I j–just—”

She exhales slowly.

“Alright. Let’s slow this down.”

Her voice is calm, but there’s an edge to it now, something warm and uncertain that makes his breath hitch. She shifts closer, careful of his leg, close enough that her knee brushes his. The contact sends sensation skittering through him like struck flint. He inhales sharply, unable to stop it.

“For what it’s worth,” She adds, staring very intently at the wall behind him, “I haven’t… anything.”

He blinks, “An–Anything?”

She lets out a short, self-conscious huff, *“Anything.* With a man. With anyone.”

The admission lands like a weight and a gift all at once.

“I d–didn’t kn–know,” He says softly.

“I didn’t make a habit of telling people. I thought I was doing right by you. Separate beds. Space. Time,” Her mouth twists, “Seems I misjudged how that would feel.”

His throat tightens, “I’m n–not r–rushed… I j–just— I w–want y–you.”

The words spill out before he can stop them.

She goes still again. Then, very carefully, she reaches for his face, thumb brushing the corner of his mouth. The touch sends a shiver through him so sharp he gasps.

“Okay… Then we’ll take this as it comes.”

She leans in.

The kiss is gentle. Soft. A question more than a demand.

Jonas answers it without thinking.

His mouth trembles against hers, clumsy and earnest, all the feelings he can’t say pouring into the press of his lips. She makes a low sound and deepens it just a little. Enough to make his head spin. His hand comes up on its own, fingers curling into her shirt at her waist, needing something solid to hold onto. She doesn’t pull away.

“Oh,” She murmurs against his mouth, *“Jonas.”*

The sound of his name in her voice nearly undoes him.

They kiss again, slower this time. Learning. Hands moving cautiously, over fabric, mapping warmth and shape without rushing ahead of themselves. Every touch feels loud, electric, like something sacred being handled with bare hands.

“You’re okay,” She whispers, forehead resting against his, “I’ve got you.”

And then they kiss again.

They kiss for a long while, long enough that time loosens its grip and becomes something thin and pliable between them. Jonas loses himself in the simple rhythm of it: the careful press of her mouth, the way she exhales against him when his fingers stray to her cheek, tentative as a question. Every nerve in him seems to wake at once. His body hums, restless and oversensitised, the low ache he has carried for weeks sharpening into something insistent and bewildering. It is almost painful, this wanting, and he does not know what to do with it.

When the kiss deepens, a small, involuntary sound slips out of him. He tips into her without meaning to, yielding rather than leading, letting her set the pace because he doesn’t know how not to. His mouth opens under hers, soft and eager, and when she adjusts her angle he follows immediately, a quiet, needy noise caught low in his throat.

“That’s it,” She murmurs, more to herself than to him, steady and warm. Her hand slides up his back, firm and anchoring, and he shivers hard at the contact. His fingers flex uselessly in her shirt, grip tightening as if he’s afraid he’ll float apart if he lets go. He makes another sound, breathy and unguarded, forehead dropping briefly to her shoulder as the feeling crests too high to hold all at once.

He nods when she shifts him again, even before she asks, trusting her with the direction of it because his body already has. Every kiss pulls a little more from him, little broken noises, soft whimpers he can’t quite stop, each one leaving him more exposed and more certain all at once.

He has never felt anything like this. Not even in the rare moments he

allowed himself to imagine, lying awake in the dark before Branwen's name had worked itself into his bones. Those thoughts were always fleeting, chased away with a rush of heat and guilt. Men are not meant to want so openly, not like this. Wanting is something you wait for, something granted if you are fortunate and well-behaved. A man is meant to be grateful, quiet, contained. Despite himself, the *Genteel Standard* comes to his mind, its words shaming him.

He is not meant to ache. And yet his body does, traitorously alive under her hands, answering her nearness without his permission. For a panicked moment, he half-wonders if this is the fair folk's work again, some mischief played on a man who has stepped too close to happiness. The thought is easier than believing the truth: that this heat is his, and that it answers her.

Branwen pulls back first, only enough to breathe, her forehead resting against his. In the dim light her eyes search his face, steady and unflinching, and the gentleness of it nearly undoes him. His heart hammers. Surely she can see it, how badly he wants her, how far past propriety he's already gone. He braces for reproach he knows he deserves and fears more than anything.

"You're shaking," She says quietly.

Her hand settles at his hip, solid and warm through the thin fabric of his shirt, as if to anchor him. The touch sends a sharp shiver through him, lodging low in his belly, and he has to fight the urge to pull away from his own response.

"I—I c–can't h–help it," He manages weakly, unsteady but honest. His face burns, shame curling tight in his chest, but he does not look away. Not from her, "Y–you m–make me f–feel… e–everything."

The words feel dangerous as soon as they leave him, too much truth

spoken aloud, but her closeness makes them survivable.

She lets out a quiet huff of a laugh, fond rather than mocking, and something in her expression softens, “That’s not a bad thing,” She murmurs, as if stating a fact she has decided to believe. Her thumb moves in a slow, absent circle where his shirt meets skin, and the small motion is enough to make his breath hitch again, “Do you want to stop?”

The question feels like mercy. Embarrassment and longing tangle so tightly Jonas can no longer tell them apart. He knows what he should say. What a careful man would say. Instead, the truth slips out of him, fast and bare.

“No,” He whispers. Then, softer still, as if asking forgiveness for it, “P–please d–don’t.”

She swallows once, visibly steadying herself. Her breath is warm where it ghosts over his cheek, “Hey,” She murmurs, “You’re safe with me. I promise.”

His chest tightens painfully at that, heart kicking hard enough he’s sure she must feel it. He nods without lifting his head, a soft, broken sound escaping him as relief and want crash together. When she shifts again, it’s only to tuck him closer, her arm firm around his shoulders, holding him like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

“Okay. Tell me if it ever becomes too much for you.”

She leans in again, slower now, as if giving him time to catch his breath. The kiss is unhurried, grounding, and her hand drifts downward with care, mindful of his injured leg. When her fingers reach the edge of his trousers, barely there, his breath breaks against

her mouth. His body reacts before his sense can follow, arching toward her touch on instinct alone. The movement tugs at his thigh, a dull reminder of the wound, but it fades beneath the sharper heat gathering elsewhere, frightening in its intensity.

Panic flares.

She stops. Her palm rests flat against his thigh, warm and steady, not pressing, not retreating. She looks at him, her gaze calm enough to make room for his fear.

“This alright?” Branwen asks.

He nods, the motion jerky. Words take longer to come out. A guilt he can’t quite shake off sits thick and heavy in his chest but his body’s response is obvious and mortifying, something he cannot hide no matter how still he goes. Finally he swallows and forces the question out, halting and careful, every syllable a risk.

“Y–yes. B–but… c–can I t–touch y–you t–too? If it’s a–alr–right.”

The asking feels like a transgression in itself. Men are meant to wait. To receive, if they are lucky. Wanting to give, to do something in return, feels dangerously close to presumption. His voice wavers on the last word.

Branwen stills, her breath catching just slightly, and for a heartbeat he is certain he has overstepped. Then she nods. She takes his hand and guides it, firm but gentle, to the ties at her trousers.

“Together,” She says.

His fingers shake as he clumsily and slowly works at the laces. He has no real notion of what he is doing, no map to follow. The few crude and whispered conversations he has overheard from other servants back in the main house offer no help at all. Nothing real. Nothing useful. Men are not taught these things. They are not meant to know. His heart pounds as shame and fear crowd in. What if he fumbles? What if he disappoints her? What if this boldness is punished the moment it's allowed?

Somewhere in the back of his mind, he imagines the fair folk laughing themselves breathless, nudging him into folly for their own amusement.

The fabric loosens beneath his hands. His fingers slip further than he intended and brush warm skin. She is softer than he expects, warmer, and when his touch strays a fraction more, something unfamiliar meets him, unmistakable and alarming. He freezes, breath hitching. Surely this means he has gone too far. Surely this is wrong. Jonas pulls back a little, as if he has touched a live coal. His face burns.

I'm— I'm ruining it. I must be doing something wrong.

But Branwen does not pull away.

Instead, her hand comes over his, stilling him for a heartbeat before guiding him forward again. She says nothing. The steadiness of it feels like permission more than encouragement, and he swallows hard, fingers moving once more, careful as if he might break something precious. The warmth beneath his touch is constant, living, and when she lets out just a small, unguarded sound— He freezes outright.

The self-imposed shame floods him again.

He should stop. He should apologize at once, take his hand away before he proves himself crude and unfit. But her grip tightens on his arm, not in rebuke, but holding him there. Anchoring him. The contact steadies his racing thoughts enough that he dares to continue, slower still, guided by nothing but her breathing. The way her body answers— a subtle shift, a sudden stillness that feels like restraint rather than refusal— makes something fragile and startling bloom in his chest. This might be good. Not improper, not wrong. Sacred, even.

The idea unnerves him more than fear ever has. He has stumbled into something powerful without meaning to, and it terrifies him that it is real because her body says it is, honest and unguarded.

At the same time, her other hand has slipped free of his trousers, closing around him warm and sure.

“A–Ah…!”

The sensation hits him like a blow. He gasps, body jerking despite himself. This response— *this hardness, this need*— is too much. It is frightening in its force, in how plainly it declares him.

I–I’m so… s–so ungainly and ugly down there… b–b–but she’s…!!

No woman has ever touched him there. Not once in all his quiet years of service, of keeping his head down and his hands busy, of swallowing every improper thought before it could take root. And now it is her— Branwen, the woman who has shared this cottage these past months in chaste companionship, who has seen him at his most broken and still chosen to stay— who holds him so intimately.

The weight of that knowledge crashes through him, heavier than any shame he has carried before. She is not some distant lady. She is Branwen, *his* Branwen, the one whose voice steadies him when the world tilts, whose rare smiles feel like sunlight after long rain. That she would choose to touch him here, to learn the shape and heat of him with her own hand, feels like something too large, too generous, too undeserved for a man of his station and his sex. For her to reach for him is a gift so profound it borders on sacrilege. He feels exposed in a way that has nothing to do with bare skin. Every stroke she gives is a question he never thought he would be permitted to answer.

She moves slowly, as if learning him as she goes like he is for her, and he bites back a sound, pressing his face briefly into her shoulder to hide it. The pleasure builds, sharp and insistent. The words slip out before he can stop them.

“I— Ngh… Br–Branwen… D–don’t s–stop. P–Please…”

She does not stop. Her hand keeps its steady pace, drawing uneven breaths from him that he can no longer fully suppress. The distraction makes his own fingers falter again. But she guides him back with a quiet, grounding word— *“There”*— low and certain.

Her fingers press his gently deeper, past a tuft of hair and the soft outer warmth to where she is slick and yielding in a way that steals the air from his lungs. He has never known this place, never imagined it could feel so alive under his touch. The heat, the gentle give, the way her body seems to welcome him even as it trembles. It’s quiet, reverent, *terrifying.*

He is touching the most private heart of her, the secret place only a husband should know, only a woman may grant. And she has granted it to him. The realization makes his hand shake so badly he nearly withdraws again, afraid he will spoil the moment with his ignorance, his clumsiness. But her hand stays over his, patient, unmoving, letting him feel the truth of her response: the subtle parting, the faint quiver,

the way her breath catches and holds when his fingertips brush a particular spot.

He dares not move more than she allows. Every small shift of his fingers is a question; every pause is him waiting for her to push him away. Instead she keeps him there, her grip steady, her breathing the only permission he needs.

“Mhm,” Branwen hums and another shiver is sent straight down Jonas’s spine. That simple noise, that signal of *pleasure,* gives him more gratification than he thought possible. A fresh wave of heat washes over his lower half, where he other hand still holds his length.

Jonas’s fingers move with painstaking care, tracing the warm softness between her thighs, exploring the slick folds that part beneath his hesitant touch as though inviting him deeper into a secret he has no right to know. The heat of her surrounds him, intimate and overwhelming, and every small shift of his hand draws a faint tremor from her body, a quiet hitch in her breathing that makes his own pulse stutter in response. He is lost in the sensation, in the way she grows wetter under his fumbling exploration, when his fingertips brush a small, firm nub nestled at the apex of her sex— There is a sudden and unmistakable response. Her hips jerk once, a sharp involuntary motion, and a soft, breathy chuckle escapes her.

“Knew… Mhm… Knew you'd find it eventually.”

Jonas has no name for this little place that makes her breath catch so sharply, but he knows at once it is precious, that it answers to him in a way nothing else has. He circles it gently, testing, and her chuckle fades into a broken exhale, her fingers tightening around him in return— Still stroking slow and steady along his length, grounding him even as he learns her.

The pleasure he draws from that sensitive point feels like a gift he never earned, yet he cannot stop, too eager, too reverent to give her anything less than the careful attention she has granted him.

Her hand on him remains steady, nothing like the jerky uncertainty he half-expected from someone who has never done this before, like himself. But perhaps, he muses, he shouldn't be surprised. This is the woman who can stare down a mirewolf. Yet here she is, her entrance soft and open beneath his touch, reacting every time he circles that small, responsive place just right. The contrast makes his head spin. Her tough, capable hand wrapped around him, moving with quiet confidence, while her body trembles under his inexperienced fingers.

A small, helpless sound slips out of him, something between a whimper and a plea, and he feels her smile against his temple.

"Easy," She says, voice low and amused despite the breathlessness threading through it, "You're shaking worse than a new foal."

"I—I c–can't— Y–you're… y–you're so s–soft h–here. I d–didn't kn–ow it w–would be l–like th–this."

She huffs another quiet chuckle, the sound rumbling against his cheek, "What did you think it would be like? Chain mail?"

The image startles a shaky laugh out of him, "M–maybe. Y–you're… y–you're always s–so s–strong. I th–thought—"

"You thought I'd be armoured down there?" Her hand slows for a moment, thumb brushing deliberately over the sensitive head of him, making his hips jerk and his breath catch, "Not quite."

He presses his face harder into her shoulder, mortified and delighted at once, “I’m s–sorry. I j–just… I d–don’t kn–ow wh–what I’m d–doing.”

“You’re doing fine,” She says, softer now, the teasing edge giving way to something warmer, “Keep going. Right there— *yes.* Like that.”

He obeys, once again circling that small, firm point with careful attention, and her breath hitches again, sharper this time. Her hand falters for half a second on him— only half a second— but he feels it, feels the way her control slips just enough to let him know she is feeling it too.

Emboldened by the sound, by the subtle lift of her hips toward his touch, Jonas dares more. He presses the pad of his thumb firmly against that sensitive little place, rubbing slow and steady circles while his middle finger slips lower, tracing the slick heat until he finds the entrance. He hesitates there, heart hammering so loud he is sure she can hear it. Branwen’s thighs part a fraction wider, an unconscious invitation, and when he presses forward— slow, so slow, one careful finger sliding inside her— the low, broken moan that escapes her makes his own breath catch in his throat. She is hot, wet, alive around him; he curls his finger gently, instinctively seeking that spot again, while his thumb never stops its patient rhythm above.

Her grip on him tightens convulsively, her strokes faltering into something slower, more desperate, and for a moment they are both trembling, caught in the same breathless discovery.

“Am I… am I d–doing it r–right?”

She smirks, words coming out breathless, “Y–You’re doing it right enough that I’m having trouble keeping my hand steady.”

The admission is so simple, so unguarded, that something in his chest unclenches. He dares a tiny, tentative increase in pressure, and her hips lift toward his hand, a motion that makes his heart stutter.

“Gods,” She mutters, the sound a mix between a laugh and a moan, “You’re… mhmmm… quick to learn when you want to be.”

“I w–want to m–make y–you f–feel g–good,” He squeaks out, the words spilling out before he can stop them, “I j–just… I d–don’t kn–ow h–how.”

“You’re figuring it out. And I’m not complaining.”

Another shaky laugh escapes him, muffled against her skin, “Y–you’re n–not m–making th–this e–easy.”

“Wasn’t planning to. But you’re holding up better than I expected.”

He presses a little harder on that sensitive place, rewarded by the way her thighs tremble and how her hand stutters on him again, just enough to make him gasp.

“Th–that’s n–not f–fair,” He manages, voice cracking.

“All’s fair,” She replies, but the words are rough, strained, and he feels the tremor in her grip, “Keep going. Don’t— Don’t you dare stop now.”

He doesn’t. He circles, presses, learns the rhythm that makes her breath come shorter, makes her body arch toward his hand even as her own keeps moving on him. They are both trembling now.

Branwen’s hand resumes its motion, firmer now, as if she's decided to take back some control. The warmth of her palm envelops him completely, her fingers wrapping around his length with a sureness that surprises him. Her smooth and deliberate slides that send sparks racing up his spine. There's a faint slickness from his own arousal aiding her movements, making each stroke glide easier, the friction just enough to build a steady heat in his belly. She twists her wrist slightly on the upstroke, experimenting, and the unexpected pressure at the tip makes his hips buck involuntarily, a gasp tearing from his lips.

"Steady," She murmurs, her voice low and teasing, though it's edged with her own uneven breaths. She leans in, capturing his mouth in a kiss that's messy and deep, her tongue brushing his with a boldness that leaves him dizzy. When she pulls back just enough to speak, her lips hover against his, "You… Ah, you keep squirming like that, and I'll have to hold you down, Jonas."

The words send a thrill through him. Branwen squeezes just a little tighter on the downstroke. He feels the calluses on her palm from years of reins and weapons, rough against his sensitive skin, contrasting with the smoothness of her strokes. It's intoxicating, the way she handles him like she's figuring out a new tool— Confident but not quite certain, her movements testing, adjusting based on the way he gasps or arches.

"I—I'm n–not s–squirming."

It’s an obvious lie, a breathless sound bubbling up. He curls his finger inside her again, thumb pressing a little harder on that responsive spot, and she lets out a sound that's half-grow, her free hand that was once guiding his to her lower half now fists in his shirt.

"Liar."

Brawen nips at his lower lip before kissing him again, her tongue exploring his mouth with the same curiosity she's showing below. Her hand speeds up just a fraction, the glide turning slicker, each pull sending waves of heat coiling tighter in his core. The pressure builds relentlessly, her thumb occasionally swiping over the head, spreading the wetness and making him shudder.

She's never done this, he reminds himself, but gods, she moves like she knows exactly how to unravel him with every twist, every squeeze.

And so Jonas slides a second finger inside her, careful and slow, feeling the way she stretches around him with a wet *squelch.* The kiss breaks as she presses her forehead to his.

"J–Jonas," She breathes, her voice rougher now, less controlled, "That's... keep doing that."

"Like th–this?" He asks, curling both fingers gently, thumb still circling above. She nods, eyes half-closed, and he feels a surge of something like pride as Branwen’s long, deliberate pulls on his length make his toes curl.

"Yeah," She says, a hint of that gruff command slipping back in, though it's softened by the way her hips rock subtly against his hand, "Just like that."

"Y–you're the one s–slowing d–down."

"Am I?"

She arches a brow, even in the dark he can see the challenge in her eyes. Her hand tightens, speeding up with a twist that makes stars burst behind his eyelids, the rough pad of her thumb pressing just under the head on each upstroke. The sensation is electric, building a pressure that has him panting into her neck.

"How's that?"

"G–good. T–too g–good. Br–Branwen… nghn!"

He kisses her there, open-mouthed and desperate, tasting the salt of her sweat as he matches her pace— Fingers thrusting slow and deep inside her, thumb rubbing firm circles that make her thighs clench around his hand.

"You're... not so bad yourself. For a first time."

"F–first t–time f–for b–both of us," He reminds her, a teasing lilt creeping into his voice despite the stutter. He curls his fingers again, pressing upward, and she gasps, her hand squeezing him in retaliation. A tight, slick slide that nearly undoes him.

"Don't get cocky," She says, but there's no bite to it, just amusement laced with need.

Branwen kisses him hard again, tongue tangling with his as her hand works him faster, the rhythm turning urgent, her palm slick and hot against him. He feels every inch of her touch; the way her fingers flex, the slight drag of her nails on the sensitive underside. Jonas’s fingers

go deeper, thrusting with more confidence.

Their movements sync, her hand stroking him in time with his fingers inside her, the air filled with the quiet sounds of their breaths, the faint slick noises that make his face heat even now.

Branwen leans in, whispering against his ear, "You're making me... shite… *Jonas."*

Her hand twists again and the pleasure spikes sharp, making his hips thrust into her grip. He mirrors it below, curling his fingers while his thumb rubs faster, and she shudders against him, a low whine escaping her.

"Close," She mutters, her usual gruffness fracturing into something vulnerable, her hand speeding up on him as if to pull him with her, "You too?"

"Y–yes," He gasps, the coil in his belly tightening unbearably. Her strokes are relentless now, slick and firm, each one building the heat until he's trembling, on the edge.

Another messy and desperate kiss, and her body clenches around his fingers in rhythmic waves. The feel of her coming undone— hot, tight, shuddering— tips him over. Release crashes through him, warmth spilling over her hand in pulses that leave him boneless, gasping her name against her lips.

They crest together, bodies locked in the same shuddering rhythm. Her inner walls flutter and grip his fingers in tight, rolling contractions, each pulse drawing a low, broken sound from deep in her throat that vibrates against his mouth. At the exact moment her climax seizes her, his own peaks in answer: thick, hot spurts coat her

palm and wrist, his hips jerking helplessly into her grip as wave after wave rolls through him.

The pleasure is blinding, overwhelming, a white-hot rush that blanks his mind and leaves only sensation— her hand still moving through it, milking every last tremor from him with slow, deliberate pulls; the slick heat of her around his fingers, fluttering in time with his release as though their bodies are answering one another across the distance between them. He feels her tremble against him, her thighs clamping around his wrist, her breath stuttering in short, ragged bursts against his cheek. For several long seconds they are suspended there, caught in the same cresting wave, every muscle taut and quivering until the peak finally breaks and they begin the slow, trembling slide back down.

She holds him through it, her own breaths ragged, hand slowing to gentle strokes as they both come down. The last pulses of his release ebb into soft aftershocks, each one coaxing a small, involuntary twitch from his hips; she matches the rhythm with tiny, soothing circles of her thumb over the sensitive head until he whimpers softly, oversensitive and spent.

Inside her, his fingers feel the final, languid flutters of her climax fading, the rhythmic clenching easing into a warm, liquid stillness that makes his heart stutter all over again. She is still so hot around him, so slick, so open, and the intimacy of it— of having been inside her at the moment she let go— settles into his bones like a quiet, permanent thing.

They lie tangled together in the aftermath, breaths slowing from frantic to soft, uneven sighs that mingle in the quiet dark of the cottage. Jonas feels the last tremors ripple through him, small aftershocks that leave his limbs heavy and loose, his skin tingling where her hand still rests against him—, warm and lax now, fingers curled loosely around the softening length of him as though she is reluctant to let go entirely. The mess between them is cooling on his stomach, on her palm, sticky and intimate in a way that should embarrass him but somehow doesn't anymore. Instead it feels like

proof— *this happened, we did this together, and she is still here*.

Branwen shifts first, moving a little closer, and her thigh presses against his uninjured one. She reaches up to brush damp strands of hair from his forehead with the back of her knuckles. The gesture is so tender that his throat tightens.

“So… How was it?”

He swallows, searching for words that won’t sound foolish.

“I… I f–feel l–like I c–could s–stay r–right h–here f–forever… I th–thought I w–would f–feel… d–different. After.”

Her brow furrows slightly, concern flickering in her eyes, “Different how?”

“Like… l–like I’d b–broken s–something. Or l–like you’d r–realize you d–didn’t w–want this.” He glances down between them, at the way her hand still cradles him gently, protectively, “But you’re s–still h–here. H–holding me. And I… I f–feel s–safe.”

The admission hangs between them, fragile and true. He has spent so long expecting rejection, so long bracing for the moment someone would see the wanting beneath his careful obedience and turn away. But Branwen has seen all of it— his hesitation, his fumbling eagerness, the way his body shook with need— and she has not flinched. Continues not to flinch. She has met him halfway, guided him, teased him, let him see her own vulnerability in return.

She exhales slowly, thumb brushing the corner of his mouth, “I’m not

going anywhere. Never. Especially not after that."

He closes his eyes, letting the promise settle into his bones. When he opens them again, he finds her watching him with an expression so unguarded it makes his chest ache. Soft, almost wondering, as though she is seeing him for the first time too.

"Y–you were… s–so s–trong," He whispers hoarsely, "E–even when y–you w–were… l–like th–this." He gestures hesitantly toward where their bodies are still pressed together, slick and spent, "I th–thought you'd b–be the o–one in ch–charge the w–whole t–time. And you w–were. B–but y–you let me s–see you f–fall a–part a l–little. And it… it f–felt l–like a g–gift."

Her lips curve into a tired, crooked smile.

"You gave me one right back," She lifts her hand from between them, inspecting the evidence of his release on her fingers with a faint, bemused huff, "Look at the mess you made."

He flushes, but there is no real embarrassment in it this time, only warmth and a shy pride.

"Y–you m–made it t–oo… I f–felt y–you… a–round m–my f–fingers. It w–was… b–beautiful."

The word feels inadequate, but her expression softens further, eyes going liquid in the low light. She leans in and kisses him, this time slow and unhurried, tasting of salt and shared breath. When she pulls back, she rests her forehead against his.

“I’ve never let anyone see me like that. Not even close.”

“Th–then I’m… I’m h–honoured,” He says, and means it with every bruised, hopeful part of himself.

“You’re going to make me soft, Jonas.”

“Y–you’re a–already s–soft.. J–just… n–not where p–people e–expect.”

She chuckles at that, then catches his hand, presses a kiss to the centre of his palm.

“And you’re braver than you think.”

They fall quiet after that, simply breathing together, bodies cooling slowly. Her arm drapes over his waist, heavy and possessive in the gentlest way. The ache in his leg has long since become dull and unimportant. He rests his head on her shoulder, listening to the steady thud of her heart beneath his ear— Strong and sure, the same heartbeat that has carried her through hunts and battles and long nights on patrol.

And now it carries him too.

The cottage is silent except for their shared breathing. There is only this: The warmth of her skin against his and the lingering scent of them both on the sheets.

Jonas closes his eyes. He lets himself sink into the afterglow like

sinking into deep, safe water. For the first time in years, the shame that has shadowed every want he has ever felt is gone— Not banished forever, perhaps, but quieted, soothed by the simple truth of her arms around him.

She presses one last kiss to his hair.

“Sleep,” She murmurs, voice thick with exhaustion and something softer, something that sounds close to contentment.

He does, finally, wrapped in her embrace, the steady rhythm of her heartbeat lulling him under like the most gentle lullaby he has ever known.

Jonas feels cool morning air when Branwen opens the door to begin work. He’ll join her now. *Finally.* Nothing strenuous yet, but he thinks he can manage some cooking and light cleaning.

To his surprise, Brenna is already crossing the yard with a steaming mug in one hand and a small basket in the other, probably breakfast scraps or bread for the hounds. She spots them in the doorway and lifts her chin in greeting.

“Morning, you two,” She calls. Then she pauses, squinting at Jonas as she draws closer. A slow, knowing grin spreads across her face, eyes flicking between the two of them, “Well, look at *you.* Glowing like a lantern. Someone sleep well?”

Jonas feels the heat rush into his cheeks instantly. He ducks his head, suddenly very interested in the state of his bootlaces. Branwen, beside

him, merely crosses her arms and raises one brow at Brenna.

“Mind your own business, Brenna,” She says, but there is no real heat in it. Only the faintest trace of a smirk.

Esther laughs, unrepentant, and holds out the basket.

“Brought you some bread and cheese. Figured you might need your strength after getting well enough to move around. But now I think you may need your strength after… whatever may have kept you both up half the night.”

Jonas makes a small, mortified noise. Branwen takes the basket with a grunt of thanks, then reaches out and ruffles his hair.

“Eat,” She tells him, voice low enough for only him to hear, “You’ll need it. I’m not done with you yet.”

Brenna pretends not to hear, already turning back toward the stables with a wave and another laugh. Jonas stands there, face burning and heart full, and thinks that he has never felt so seen, so wanted, so utterly at home.

He takes the bread she offers him, their fingers brushing, and smiles.

“Th–thank you,” He says softly.

Branwen bumps his shoulder with hers, “Anytime.”

Chapter End Notes

Me: I'm going to take a break now that the main storyline is finished.
Also me: (doesn't do that)

Okay maybe NOW I'll take a break since I am officially burned out and (frankly) pretty bored with this story. I may come back to it for some cute scenes, or maybe not. Idk. I want to focus on other stuff. I've got two ideas in my head and will only post them once I have 3-5 chapters written out in advance. I don't really know where to start... So tell me what you want to read first:

Story 1:
Post-revolution, with the royal family dead and the old order dismantled, Élise Moreau is a veteran soldier of the uprising, known quietly for having done what others could not when the monarchy fell. As the new regime fractures into competing factions and foreign powers circle a weakened nation, Élise is drawn into the brutal work of governance and compromise, where ideals are tested by necessity. Amid this uneasy rebuilding, she is gifted the former bed slave of a duchess she helped kill, a living remnant of the old world that refuses to stay buried.

This story would be darker and pretty violent. Going back to my roots of making men victims of... everything...

Story 2:
In the high-stakes world of competitive climbing, Maddie Sinclair and Riley Thompson clash at Canada's National Championships—Maddie's explosive bouldering flair against Riley's stoic lead precision. Instant rivals, both secure spots on Team Canada for the IFSC World Cup circuit, forcing them into shared training camps and international events from China to Austria. They dislike each other on sight but are forced to work together, their friction sharpening into an attraction neither wants to acknowledge. As podium pressure, injuries, and national expectations mount, rivalry blurs into grudging respect, then into something messier and undeniable.

Gay sports! Lesbians! The idea has been floating in my head as I am feeling increasing frustration that sports romance writers and readers seem chronically allergic to women's sports and also why

do men get all the mainstream queer shows? I'm sure there's an essay on misogyny in there somewhere but, I can do what I can to help fill the gap... (also competitive climbing is the only sport I watch lmao).

I want to write both stories eventually, but one at a time... Let me know what you'd like to see first! Orrr... you can commission me for something completely different wink wonk.

And if you're so inclined, you can support me via the linktree below! It just links to my ko-fi.

https://linktr.ee/sanguia

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